Dem Bones

Consider the health benefits and risks before incorporating raw bones into your dog's diet.

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The debate over whether to feed raw bones to dogs rages on. Hardcore believers in bone feeding claim that feeding bones is the way to optimum health for dogs. People who are against feeding bones point to examples of dogs that have had their intestines clogged with bone fragments, or develop worn or fractured teeth.

What's a concerned and responsible dog owner to do? When it comes to feeding bones, there is no simple answer. As a holistic veterinarian, I always try to return to more-natural ways of doing things – letting dogs be dogs. Because chewing on bones is a natural canine behavior, I'm strongly in favor of dogs feeding bones, with some caveats.
Let's take a closer look at some of the pros and cons of feeding bones:

Benefits of feeding bones
Dental. There's no question that the abrasive action of chewing bones helps improve a dog's dental health. Many owners who feed bones and holistic veterinarians who recommend feeding bones point out that the abrasive action of chewing bones helps keep teeth clean.

However, it should be noted that canine dental hygiene is an individual matter. Some dogs have pearly white teeth for most of their lifetime; others seem to accumulate tartar no matter what we try. In any event, dog owners who feed bones almost universally report cleaner teeth and fewer trips to the vet for routine dental work.

Physical and mental health. The act of chewing bones (including bones with meat attached) works a canine's jaw, face and tongue muscles. Watching a dog go to work on a bone gives us an appreciation for how blissful the experience is. There's no better canine sedative than a bone to gnaw on, and the need to chew is a natural trait domestic dogs have acquired from their wolf ancestors.

Dog owners who feed bones report health benefits, including improved digestion, joints, skin and immune system. These reports are anecdotal, it's hard to ignore their sheer numbers.

Nutritional. The nutritional benefits of bones are often touted by bone advocates, but we have to look beyond the bone for any significant amount of nutritional value. Bones themselves are mostly calcium and phosphorous (minerals that need to be digested and absorbed before they have any benefit), as well as small amounts of other (generally poorly digestible) nutrients in the marrow and cartilage.

Meat attached to bones is highly nutritious, and chondroitin, the important joint-health nutrient (which helps to lubricate joints) is found in cartilaginous tissue.

Finally, dogs don't require much calcium or phosphorous on a daily basis; the balance of mineral nutrients is more important than their overall amounts in the diet. Therefore, it would be unwise to assume that simply feeding bones will result in a balanced diet. However, proponents argue that there seems to be something other than nutrients that works to make their dogs look brighter, feel better and live healthier lives.

Risks of feeding bones
Cracked or broken teeth. Almost every veterinarian in practice can share a story or two about dogs that have fractured or chipped their teeth while chewing bones. Some dogs are such aggressive chewers that they gnaw their teeth to nubs in a few years. This can usually be avoided by supervising the dog and reinforcing slower chewing.

Stuck bones. Bone splinters that lodge in the mouth between teeth are usually easy to remove. Bones that become lodged internally are another matter, and those that can't be moved along with a laxative or an enema may require surgery. Bone fragments can become stuck anywhere along the dog's digestive tract, from mouth to anus. Rarely, a bone splinter will perforate the intestinal wall, and the only solution is surgery.

Germs and bones. Any uncooked meat can be contaminated with bacteria. Raw chicken, for example, is commonly contaminated with Salmonella. However, it's almost impossible to get a true understanding of how much we need to worry about the germs. After all, dogs are genetically programmed to eat days-old carcasses that are rife with bacteria, and it's

difficult to find confirmed cases of bacterial poisoning after a dog has eaten bones or raw foods.

Some potential exists for bacteria to pass through the dog and into the environment, where it can affect humans. Again, the extent of this problem is not clear, but take extra precautions (such as washing your hands after petting your dog) in families with young children, or households with pregnant women or anyone whose immune system is compromised.

Minimizing the risks

Cooked bones, compared to fresh, raw bones, are relatively brittle and can fragment and splinter easily. The risk of lodged bone fragments and cracked teeth can be minimized by feeding bones that are appropriate for your dog's size. The bone should be uncooked and not so small that your dog can swallow it whole. The bone should also be large enough that the dog can't get its molars around it, which would allow the dog to crush the bone – or its teeth. Dogs that gnaw on meaty bones produce more stomach acids, so bones with meat are more likely to be digested properly.

Supervision is important. Monitor your dog's chewing, and take away the bones if they begin to fragment into splinters or when your dog loses interest (so the bone does not collect bacteria). Close observation is especially vital for dogs that gulp their food; for heavy-jawed eaters (those that can crack even gigantic bones or toys); for puppies; and for first-time bone-chewers.

To help prevent bacterial contamination, handle the bones like you would any other meat product. Keep the bones refrigerated or frozen until used, clean your hands and meat-cutting surfaces after handling, and take the bones away from the dog before they start to spoil.

Grinding bones

For those who absolutely cannot bring themselves to feed their dog whole bones (some people, including some veterinarians, fall into this category), a middle-road approach is grinding the bones and feeding the resulting meat-and-bone mix. This provides some of the bone-feeding benefits without the risks. Also, feeding ground bones leaves less mess to clean up, and may make it easier to keep germs to a minimum.

Ground bones won't be as abrasive as whole bones, so the tooth-cleaning action won't be as great. However, many owners who feed ground bones report that their bone-chewers have cleaner teeth and better dental health. Dogs fed ground bones don't get to exercise their gnawing muscles, though, and there's no "thrill of the chew" with ground bones.
Finding a relatively inexpensive grinder that is both strong enough to grind bones and has a warranty that will cover regular grinding can be a chore. An Internet search would be a good place to start looking.

Dogs being dogs

It's my opinion that feeding bones is one of the best ways to encourage dogs to be dogs, naturally. As a veterinarian, I have seen some problems with feeding bones – such as chipped teeth, rare intestinal impactions and extremely rare perforations – but the incidence of problems is low, especially when we consider all the dogs that routinely eat bones.

I'm convinced that the extent of these issues is nowhere near the health-related problems we see in pets that are fed poor-quality commercial foods. And so, for all dogs, with the possible exception of the gulpers and hard-gnawers, I whole-heartedly recommend bones as an addition to a high-quality diet.

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