Years before raw-inspired dog and cat foods ever started appearing in pet stores, a growing movement of pet parents began preparing their own pets' meals at home from raw meats and produce they'd purchased from the local butcher or grocery.

Even today, raw feeding your pets with homemade ingredients remains a controversial topic. As the research community attempts to sort out the potential benefits and risks, many pet owners are coming to their own conclusions and wondering how to incorporate more "raw foods" in their pet's diet. Here's what you need to know.

**Biologically Appropriate Raw Food diets**

Raw feeding is believed by some to be more aligned with the evolutionary needs of dogs and cats. Since the wild ancestral cousins of our dogs and cats consumed a diet consisting of raw muscle meat, organs, bones, grasses and other plant sources, proponents of raw feeding believe today's pets should be eating similarly. In addition, they believe a dog's digestive tract is not well adapted to digest the processed grains and fillers found in many of today's diets.

**Possible Benefits**

Most of the benefits attributed to raw feeding are not yet fully supported by research. But, many pet owners claim anecdotal health benefits for their pet, such as:

- less gas and firmer stools
- fresher breath
- more energy
- shinier coat
Anatomical Adaptations for Raw Meat Feeding

Dogs and cats have many anatomical characteristics that support raw-meat eating. The size and shape of their teeth rips and tears raw meat easily, preparing it for passage into the stomach. Both cats and dogs have very low stomach pH (highly acidic), an environment that is hospitable for the digestion of raw meat. Finally, a carnivore's smaller-length intestinal tract pushes raw meat through quickly.

What about Raw Produce?

Some people believe that raw produce is more nutritious than the veggies and fruits found in high heat-processed commercial kibble. The pet food manufacturing industry often compensates for this by adding heat stable nutrients to make the diet complete and balanced. Starch and fiber found in raw plant material are more difficult for a pet to digest. In the wild, much of the vegetable matter canines eat is partially digested. To mimic this, raw food enthusiasts chop up the pieces very small or process them first in a food processor because they believe it helps support digestion.

Safety & Nutritional Concerns

Veterinarians are concerned about raw diets largely because of the possibility of infection from bacteria/parasites and the possibility of nutritional deficiencies.

When veterinarians recommend a diet for pets, they make sure it is appropriate for the species, complete and balanced from a nutrient standpoint, and formulated to meet unique lifestage needs of the pet. Nutritional deficiencies open the door to disease, so pets on raw diets made at home may need to supplement certain nutrients to ensure their pet is receiving complete and balanced nutrition.

Risk of Infection by Bacteria

Any raw meat and produce can put your pet and family at risk of exposure to pathogens like Salmonella, E. coli, Listeria, Campylobacter, and Clostridium. Cooking generally destroys these pathogens, but in the raw stage, the risk remains. These pathogens can be extremely dangerous, causing severe diarrhea, cramping, and dehydration - even fatalities in some cases.

Worth the Risk?

Proponents of raw diets say the benefits outweigh the risks, but education is key. Working within a sanitary environment, properly cleaning tools, sterilizing utensils, and choosing fresh, safe sources for meats is crucial. They agree that raw feeding at home should also be done in close collaboration with a nutritionist and veterinarian to ensure all the bases are covered from a nutritional standpoint.

Interested in "Going Raw" Without all the Fuss?

Fortunately, there's a growing number of store bought options hitting the pet food
market that allow pet parents to try the benefits of "raw" feeding without the hassle or worry of home preparation. Due to increasing interest in the "raw food movement," a number of pet food companies are now making raw diets, or offering them in shelf-stable, convenient forms such as freeze-dried or dehydrated.

Raw meat constitutes a large percentage of these formulas (along with organs and bones), as well as some produce and supplements for nutritional balance. The manufacturers tout the nutritional benefits of raw without all the fuss of handling raw meat and cutting produce at home. Plus, the nutrient balance is figured out for you. Most require no further supplementation unless recommended by a veterinarian.

For the freeze-dried or dehydrated forms, you generally add a little water, let the food sit a while to reconstitute the food, and then feed it to your pet. There are usually some precise guidelines about how to transition a pet to one of these diets, as well as safe handling guidelines.

Learn More about Raw Feeding & Foods

Raw Foods
Overview
Raw Foods
Selection Guide
Storage
Tips