

# Raw Food Diets and Associated Risks

For varying reasons, some pet owners choose to feed their companion cats and dogs diets containing raw animal products. Such products include diets that are commercially available (fresh, frozen, or freeze-dried) or home-prepared. Certain supplementary items that are commonly fed to companion dogs as treats, such as rawhide chews, ears, hooves, tracheas, and bull penises (known as bully sticks) should also be categorized as raw meat-based foods.

Scientific evidence clearly demonstrates risks associated with feeding raw foods but little to no documented benefit, despite claims to the contrary. The risks of feeding a raw meat-based diet includes risks to people as well as to the pets eating the diet. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration Center for Veterinary Medicine, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American College of Veterinary Nutritionists, the American Animal Hospital Association, the American Veterinary Medical Association, and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association acknowledge the safety risks (both public health and otherwise) of feeding raw animal products to companion cats and dogs, and most of these groups discourage the practice.

## NUTRITIONAL RISKS

Studies have demonstrated that both commercially available and home-prepared raw meat-based diets may be nutritionally unbalanced. Unbalanced diets can place the pet at risk of nutrient deficiencies (for instance, vitamin deficiency) or excesses (for instance, too much protein or fat). Despite having the potential to be serious, the negative health consequences of such deficiencies or excesses are not always immediately evident.

Commercial pet foods formulated to be the pet's primary diet should bear an Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) statement that says the diet is complete and balanced for the appropriate species. That means the statement should specify if the food is for dogs or cats, and if it is appropriate for all life stages or if it is intended for puppies/kittens, adult animals, elderly animals, or something else. There are also pet foods that are labeled for intermittent or supplemental feeding; these foods are not intended to be fed as a pet's sole diet, unless advised by a veterinarian. Products that are overtly labeled as snacks, treats, or supplements are not required to bear an AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement, and should not be fed as the main diet.

Home-prepared pet foods lack regulatory oversight and quality control testing, and are unlikely to be nutritionally complete and balanced, regardless of whether they include raw or cooked meat. Research has demonstrated that home-prepared diet recipes for pets that are obtained from books or online sources are prone to nutritional inadequacies. For pet owners that want to prepare foods at home, it is safest to work with a veterinary nutritionist for advice on the recipe, and to cook meats used in the diet.

## SAFETY RISKS

The greatest safety risk of feeding a raw diet is contamination of the food with potentially dangerous germs, including bacteria,

protozoa, and other parasites. While pet foods containing cooked animal products can also become contaminated and should be handled with appropriate sanitary measures, foods containing raw animal products pose a higher risk of contamination. Many bacterial pathogens may be present in raw meat based diets, including *Salmonella* spp, *Campylobacter* spp, *Clostridium* spp, *Escherichia coli*, and *Listeria* spp. Nonbacterial pathogens that can be found in raw meat include *Toxoplasma gondii*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Echinococcus*, *Neospora*, and *Sarcocystis*.

Not only the pet, but also the people that feed and clean up after the pet can be exposed to the germs that contaminate raw foods. Cats and dogs that eat contaminated food can become carriers without becoming sick; these carriers can expose other animals or people to the pathogen through their waste products. Pet owners can also become infected during preparation or handling of contaminated pet foods, or exposure to surfaces that come in contact with contaminated foods. The people that are most susceptible to developing illness from pathogenic bacterial exposure are young children, the elderly, and people that are immunocompromised by disease, immunosuppressive or chemotherapeutic drugs, or transplant recipients. It is especially important that people with these types of conditions avoid feeding their pet raw food diets.

Although many animals that eat raw foods containing potential pathogens stay healthy despite carrying the infection, some animals will develop serious illness or even death. Such illnesses have been documented in both dogs and cats infected with *Salmonella*, *Clostridium* spp, and *Campylobacter* spp. These kinds of potential pathogens are especially dangerous to pets with compromised immune systems (for example, pets with cancer or that receive corticosteroids).

An additional risk from some raw diets relates to feeding bones. Although many people are under the misimpression that eating raw bones will clean a dog's teeth, bones are more likely to cause harm than good. Bones can break teeth or cause oral trauma (cuts or abrasions in the mouth). Bones can become lodged in the mouth, throat, stomach, or intestines, sometimes requiring surgical or endoscopic removal. Bones can also fracture into sharp points; this is especially likely with poultry and pork bones. These sharp bone fragments can penetrate the intestines. If this happens, there is a very real chance that the pet will die as a result of abdominal infection (peritonitis).

## PET FOOD SAFETY

To reduce health risk to pets and their owners, animal products should be thoroughly cooked before feeding to pets. This is particularly important in homes where young, elderly, or immunocompromised people and pets reside. All pet foods and potentially contaminated food items and objects should be kept out of reach of small children. Whether pet foods are cooked or raw, pet owners should always wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water after feeding a pet or handling potentially contaminated food items (like pet food bowls).

If you do opt to feed raw animal products, leftovers should be disposed of promptly. Food that sits out in the bowl will have more bacterial growth and a greater risk for causing infection. Food bowls that have contained raw animal products should be cleaned immediately after use, followed by disinfection by soaking in a 10% bleach solution and then thorough rinsing; this may not eliminate foodborne pathogens entirely. For additional tips on proper pet food handling and sanitation, consult the U.S. Centers for Disease Control website at <https://www.cdc.gov/features/pet-food-safety/index.html>.

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