

Having conversations with owners about unconventional diets

Jonathan Stockman DVM DACVIM (Nutrition)

Commercial pet food was first introduced in the 1920s mostly as canned foods or dry biscuits. Extruded dry foods were first produced in the 1950s. Before this, dogs and cats would feed on table scraps, and leftover foods and some would also hunt.

The important benefit of feeding commercial pet food is that foods denoted as 'complete and balanced' should provide all essential nutrients to support an animal in a specific physiological state (for example, during growth or reproduction). This allows pet owners to avoid the need to add supplements to balance the food.

While most pet owners are satisfied with feeding dry or canned pet food, many prefer to feed other diets for a variety of reasons. Some owners express distrust in commercial pet food manufacturers, a desire to feed their pet in a more 'natural' way, or a preference to feed them as a member of the family.

While pet owners generally prefer to receive nutritional advice from their veterinarians, many report that nutrition is seldom discussed during veterinary visits. If the owner's questions or concerns are not adequately answered by their vet, they may turn to less reliable sources of information such as friends, family, pet store staff, online websites, or social media influencers.

Some of the popular trends in pet food include:

Raw/'BARF' diets: these are diets that include uncooked meat, bones, fruits, vegetables, and sometimes other ingredients. Raw diets can be homemade or commercially prepared. Homemade diets are often not balanced and may lead to nutritional deficiencies whereas commercial diets may be balanced. The risk for pets with raw diets is that they can be a source of pathogens that can infect the pet and humans that handle the food or are in the pet's environment. This is of high concern when the pet is in a house with elderly people, young children or immunocompromised individuals. There are no proven benefits to raw feeding although raw food may be highly digestible. Freezing or freeze-drying food may kill some parasites, but many pathogenic bacteria can survive this. High-pressure pasteurization may kill both bacteria and parasites and high-pressure pasteurized food is generally preferred over untreated raw food, or freeze-dried raw food.

'Fresh' prepared foods: these are relatively newer options for owners that want to feed food that is complete and balanced and prefer to avoid commercially prepared dry or canned foods. These foods are generally very expensive for the average pet owner and are not affordable for most. While many companies employ board-certified veterinary nutritionists (ACVIM Nutrition), there are concerns regarding the homogeneity of the food and the quality control these companies can provide.

Natural diets: Many 'natural' diets are dry extruded foods. The term 'natural' is defined by AAFCO, and foods can be termed 'natural' as long as the raw ingredients from plant, animal, or mined sources aren't subjected to, or produced by, chemically synthetic processes or blended with synthetic additives. There are no known benefits to natural diets and they are often more expensive than other diets.

Vegetarian and vegan diets: These diets can be fed to dogs due to medical reasons (for example, a low purine diet for patients with a history of urate urolithiasis) but are most often fed by owners who are themselves vegan or vegetarian. Vegetarian and vegan diets can be formulated to be complete and balanced for dogs; however recent diet surveys demonstrated that many diets are not compliant with AAFCO labeling rules, and others are deficient in essential nutrients such as essential amino acids. Vegetarian or vegan diets may not always be ideal in patients in poor nutritional status or during metabolically demanding life stages such as growth and reproduction; therefore, care must be taken to select diets by a reputable manufacturer and if possible, diets that have undergone feeding tests to confirm their adequacy for specific life stages. Vegan and vegetarian diets are not recommended in cats.

Home-cooked diets: Home-cooked diets can provide complete and balanced nutrition for the pet; however, they must be complete and balanced and free of ingredients that may be toxic. In addition, home-cooked diets are often more expensive and time-consuming than commercial diets. Most recipes in books and online are either not balanced, vague, or provide inadequate caloric intake and feeding instructions. It is recommended that pet owners utilize board-certified veterinary nutritionists or websites associated with nutritionists for pet diet formulations.

References (partial list):

Freeman LM, Michel KE. Evaluation of raw food diets for dogs. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2001 Mar 1;218(5):705-9.

Freeman LM, Chandler ML, Hamper BA, Weeth LP. Current knowledge about the risks and benefits of raw meat-based diets for dogs and cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2013 Dec 1;243(11):1549-58.

Kanakubo, K., Fascetti, A. J., & Larsen, J. A. (2015). Assessment of protein and amino acid concentrations and labeling adequacy of commercial vegetarian diets formulated for dogs and cats. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 247(4), 385-392.

Parr JM, Remillard RL. Handling alternative dietary requests from pet owners. *Vet Clin North Am Small Anim Pract.* 2014 Jul;44(4):667-88

Stockman J, Fascetti AJ, Kass PH, Larsen JA. Evaluation of recipes of home-prepared maintenance diets for dogs. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2013 Jun 1;242(11):1500-5.

Villaverde C, Chandler M. Commercial vs Homemade Cat Diets: What you need to know. *J Feline Med Surg.* 2022 May;24(5):415-428.