

Raw Food 101

By Shane E. Somerville, All The Best Pet Care

More and more concerned pet owners are turning to a raw meat and vegetable diet as a healthy, natural alternative to the more processed cooked foods that have become the standard canine and feline diets. At All The Best, we believe that dogs and cats thrive on a diet that mimics what Mother Nature would provide them in the wild. Although dogs and cats have been domesticated for thousands of years, it is only in the last sixty to seventy years that commercially processed dry and canned foods have become the standard. Before that, our companion animals ate a diet composed largely of live prey and scavenged meals, along with scraps from their caretakers' diets- whole meats, fruits, vegetables and grains. This type of diet is still what our pets' bodies are designed to process, as it takes millions of years for significant evolutionary changes in digestive processes to take place. Essentially, dogs, whether they are Chihuahuas or Huskies, are more than 99% identical to a wolf on the inside- and our domestic cats are equally identical to wild cats!

What does this mean for our pets? Even the highest quality dry and canned foods are nutritionally lacking compared to a diet composed of raw meat and bones, fresh whole fruits and vegetables, and small amounts of whole grains and starches. By offering up meals more closely approximating the diet of a wolf or wild cat, we can help ensure that our pets are getting a species-appropriate diet that will help build a strong body for a long lifetime of good health.

Types of Raw Diets

There are two basic types of raw diets for pets: commercially packaged pre-made and home prepared.

Pre-Made

- Easiest to prepare- simply thaw chubs, patties, or nuggets, and serve
- Complete and balanced with a full spectrum of trace vitamins and minerals
- Meet the required calcium levels through ground bone or other calcium source
- Come in a wide variety of brands with many unique protein sources
- Organic options available
- Can be more expensive than home prepared
- We like Nature's Variety, Natural Pet Pantry, Pepperdogz and Peppercatz

Home Prepared

- Can be made in bulk quantities for large or multiple pets
- Independently sourced ingredients can be more cost effective
- Complete control over what goes in- great for animals with allergies and special dietary needs
- May require multiple supplements such as kelp and fatty acids to reach optimum nutrient levels
- Needs a calcium component to provide necessary support for strong bones
- Try our ROAR or Natural Pet Pantry ground meats for an easy meat base
- See our "Home Prepared Diets for Dogs & Cats" handout for recipes and tips

Is raw food right for *my* pet?

No one diet is appropriate for every individual animal. Pets with depressed or compromised immune systems are often not good candidates for raw diets, as their bodies are not equipped to deal with the bacteria found in raw meats like healthy animals are. The most important thing, however, is feeling comfortable and confident in whatever you choose to feed your pet, raw or not. As with any pet food, make sure that the ingredients used are high quality and human grade, and aim for balanced nutrition and variety.

Commonly Asked Questions About Raw

Most first time raw feeders have many questions about feeding their cat or dog a raw diet. Books such as Dr. Ian Billinghust's Give Your Dog a Bone, Dr. Donald R. Strombeck's Home-Prepared Dog & Cat Diets, and Kymthy Schultze's Natural Nutrition for Dogs and Cats can offer a wealth of information, as can raw feeder internet groups and websites. Here are a few of the most common questions about raw food:

- **What about bacteria like E. coli and Salmonella?**

Our pets' bodies are well-equipped to deal with bacteria that are harmful to humans, since their natural diet is teeming with bacteria. Their short digestive tract means that food moves through the body quickly, and their highly acidic stomach juices help neutralize any bacteria present. A healthy dog or cat with a normal immune system should have no problems regarding bacteria.

- **How will it affect my pet's stools?**

Pets that are fed a raw food diet consistently have smaller, firmer stools than animals fed canned or dry food. Any excess bone matter in the diet is excreted out, often making waste appear whitish and chalky- this is completely normal. Occasionally there are some loose or odd colored stools during the transitioning process to raw. This can be a reaction to overfeeding or a too-quick change, or just a sign that toxins are being eliminated from the body due to an improved diet. Such stool changes usually do not last long.

- **How do I start feeding raw?**

Dogs are usually easy to transition to raw food. Start with small amounts either alone or mixed with canned food, and gradually increase the amount of raw while decreasing the amount of cooked. This can be done over a period of one to two weeks, taking more time if necessary for more sensitive animals. Cats, especially older ones, can be trickier. The best way to switch them is to start by mixing a pea-sized amount of raw food into their favorite canned food and adding a splash of warm water to the mixture. Over the coming weeks, or even months, gradually increase the amount of raw until your cat has fully switched.

- **How much raw food does my pet need?**

Food quantities vary based on an animal's age, metabolism, and exercise level. A good general rule of thumb is usually 1.5-3% of an adult animal's ideal body weight, divided into two meals per day for cats, and two or three for dogs. The amount can vary based on metabolism, activity level, season, and age.

- **Can I feed both raw and cooked foods?**

Absolutely! Many people feed a combination of raw and cooked foods for convenience and budgetary reasons. Grain free canned and dry foods such as Innova Evo and Nature's Variety Instinct are designed to complement a predominantly or partially raw diet. While they don't match the benefits of raw food, they offer a nice alternative for traveling and boarding, for maximizing your budget, or just for a change of pace. Canned and raw foods can be mixed easily, but be careful of mixing raw and dry. Raw food is designed to be processed quickly and spends a minimal amount of time in the digestive system, but dry food is harder to digest and spends a significantly longer amount of time in the gut. A mixing of the two may increase the potential for bacteria to linger in the system longer than is ideal. Whether you go all raw, 50/50, or offer it just a few times per week, your pet will benefit from the superior nutrition found in these foods and be a healthier animal for it!

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