

# Raw versus processed food

The debate as to whether owners should eschew conventional processed pet foods in favour of a raw diet that has sustained its kind for most of the journey back in time to their wolf ancestors over 30,000 years ago, continues at the BSAVA Scottish Congress on 3 September

An increasing proportion of clients are now convinced that the best choice for their pet is either the 'raw meaty bones' option or something from the growing range of commercial raw food products. Board-certified veterinary nutritionist Marge Chandler has been invited along to the Scottish Congress to cast a critical eye down the menu being offered to the nation's canine companions. She will review the evidence for members attending the veterinary nursing stream on what to tell their clients about diet – and how to make rational decisions on what's best for their own dogs.

Dr Chandler trained in the United States and knows that it is not just in Britain that raw diets have become a bone of contention. "I give lectures all over the world and everywhere. I am asked the same questions – there is a debate going on about this in every country that I've visited."

She notes that when choosing a diet produced by one of the major international companies, pet owners can be assured that the product contains a balance of all the nutrients that dogs need, and that it has been tested before leaving the factory. Her main concern with raw food diets is that there is no similar quality control process.

"What we do know is that the majority of home-made diets are deficient in some way. They are often heavily meat- and fat-based which can often mean deficiencies in essential minerals and

vitamins. So that may increase the risk of medical conditions such as pancreatitis or secondary hyperparathyroidism, due to an imbalance in the dietary calcium and phosphorus levels."

She is also sceptical about claims that a raw food diet containing an appropriate balance of nutrients would be inherently superior to one containing cooked proteins. "There is actually very little published evidence to support this suggestion. People do claim that there are benefits but while I have seen some dogs with conditions that do get better with a change of diet, others get worse. There are no consistent findings."

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Anyone contemplating feeding a raw diet to their pet should be aware of the risk of gastrointestinal infections for both animal and its owner. She points out a curious anomaly in UK food regulations that there are permitted limits on the bacterial contamination of meat which are stricter for pet foods than for those products intended for human consumption. "That is because it is assumed that if you are buying chicken for your family to eat, then you are going to cook it first."



Giving dogs a bone to chew on must surely be good for their dental health? "Yes, it will help to remove calculus which will improve the physical appearance of the teeth. But it will not have much effect on plaque formation and that is the main cause of periodontal disease. There is also a risk that biting on any hard object such as bones or toys may cause a tooth to fracture."

Even claims that home-made diets are more palatable than commercial foods should be taken with a pinch of salt. "When owners are making up their own foods they will of course, pick those things that they know their dog will like. That doesn't mean that they will always be choosing the right ingredients."

Better digestibility is another claimed advantage of raw food. "This sort of diet is usually very easily digested. While that is usually considered a positive feature for any food material, obesity is a big problem in our dog population so maybe that isn't always a good thing."

So Dr Chandler is sure that a properly balanced commercial dog food is the best way to keep a dog healthy and says that it is a view shared by every trained veterinary nutritionist that she has encountered.

But nutrition is an area where everyone has some personal experience and most people think that they know what is best for themselves and their pets. So what advice would she give to a client who insists that they are going to give their pet a raw food diet?

"I would recommend that they look for one of the raw diet companies that is a member of the Pet Food Manufacturers Association. That way you can guarantee that the company has agreed to operate according to the sort of professional standards that we would want all food manufacturers to observe." ■