

To Cook Or Not To Cook For Dogs
by
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For those of us lucky enough to enjoy cooking, we know the meaning of cooking for someone we care for as one of the ultimate signs of love. So, with all of our dogs I was convinced that cooking good, healthy food for them was intertwined with my love for them and that it would surely pay off with a long, healthy life. If we had grains with vegetables, pasta, meat or fish, that's what they got, and they loved it. Of course they did, after all, they were part of the family and we did everything together. They all lived to be around fourteen, which wasn't bad, but something constantly bothered me as I watched them grow from rambunctious young dogs into maturity. It wasn't that the rambunctiousness left them, especially when we were doing something they loved such as hiking in the woods or the desert, or swimming, but it came from knowing them so well and watching their slow and gradual physical degeneration. Someone else wouldn't have noticed, but we knew the difference.

Then one day I read the fateful sentence, "Whoever cooked for a coyote or a wolf?" The question kept echoing in my head especially because it was not an unfamiliar concept. My dog bible for years had been Juliette de Bairacli Levy's book, *The Complete Herbal Book for the Dog*, which she first published in 1947. Disappointed by what she observed as a young student at veterinary college in England, she left after three years of study to set out on her life's quest of what she called the natural rearing of animals as opposed to the easy acceptance of inevitable disease, which she observed in veterinary school. Levy laid the ground work for the natural rearing and feeding of animals that has been steadily gaining in strength today, although a bit slower to be accepted in the United States than in Europe and Australia. The importance of diet for optimum health cannot be denied, as is evident in Levy's choice for her first chapter in *The Complete Herbal Book for the Dog*, titled "Meat Feeding." However, she cites no such convenience as opening a can of mush, instead getting right to the point describing the dog as belonging to the family carnivora, a flesh-eating beast in his wild state, discussing its entire anatomy designed for the tearing and crushing of meat and bone to the very muscular stomach with short intestines in order to avoid putrefaction of flesh foods. More recently, the Australian veterinarian, Ian Billinghurst, published his book, *Give Your Dog a Bone* in 1993 in which he credits Juliette Levy's book as an inspiration. Dr. Billinghurst's diet philosophy for dogs and cats, which has come to be known as the BARF diet, an acronym standing for "Bones and Raw Food," or "Biologically Appropriate Raw Food," espouses the idea that our dogs and cats should be raised on the diet of their wild ancestors rather than on one of cooked or processed food, which is equated with chemical additives and preservatives found in most commercial pet foods. Another Australian veterinarian, Tom Lonsdale, believes in feeding dogs only raw, meaty bones.

Unfortunately, in our age of too much information, whether improving our own diets, or the diets of our pets, confusion sets in and we often return to the easy way we've been doing it all along. But, when common sense leads the way and we think about agribusiness with all of its implications for huge profits while delivering low quality, and while realizing that the pet food industry is simply an extension of our own food industry, we then might be willing to take that little extra step for our beloved pets. With just about every subject today having its strong pros

and cons, we have the added burden of having to take the time to dissect the facts, but there is one fact on which we can rely, and that is that buying the least expensive pet food is the same sort of quick fix, short sighted attitude that prevails when we succumb to fast food with the same outcome----illness and doctor bills. With that in mind, is the raw food diet for our pets too difficult to fathom? Let's take a look. Raw diets may include raw meat, raw veggies, eggs, yogurt, fruit, nuts, etc. All of those ingredients other than the raw meat present no problems for us, and since cooked meat is actually thought to be detrimental for animals, the only other way to kill most parasites is by freezing first. In fact, it's interesting to note that it is cooked meat bones, which can cause choking in carnivores, not raw bones. When a carnivore brings down its prey, the contents of the prey's stomach are raw, simply warmed by body temperature, and the same with the meat of the prey animal. By now some of us are getting pretty squeamish, especially those who are vegetarians. Admittedly, it took me a while to get used to handling the stuff, but if you've ever needed convincing that these carnivores truly love their meat, just give them a raw meaty bone, you've never seen such happiness, such concentration of energy----it's all that exists for them at that moment! There are those who argue that our "domesticated" animals are so far removed from their wild ancestral roots, that they can no longer handle a close to wild diet. Perhaps, but as the great animal behaviorist, Konrad Lorenz noted, cats have never truly been domesticated. And, while it's true that our domesticated dogs probably have lost their instinct for bringing down prey, they seem not to have lost their instinct for knowing what to do with meat and bones. However, there is the old dog, new tricks syndrome where some older dogs are so addicted to their dry food diet that they really don't know what to do with a bone!

Whole Health for Happy Dogs by Jill Elliot, DVM, is a relatively small, clear and concise book for the beginner desiring to raise pets in a holistic, preventive manner in order to avoid the same diseases that plague us today. For those of us who remember what dogs looked like a couple of generations ago, it was rare to see an overweight dog riddled with obvious tumors, and sick with cancer, arthritis, etc.-----as our health went, so went theirs, all fed by the multi-billion dollar pet food industry. In 1947, Juliette Levy was ahead of her time; by 2009 it's no wonder that a holistic/preventive approach has surged immensely in popularity. Jill Elliot's method is gentle, yet to the point. Before lauding the positive aspects of a raw food diet for dogs, she gives one simple downside to a home-cooked diet: "Anytime we cook food over 180 degrees F, enzymes and probiotics are destroyed in the process." However, she believes that, "A diet consisting of primarily raw meat and bones will help your dog's body deal with or even eliminate many of the common ailments we've seen in dogs today. Hot spots, excessive shedding, flea infestations, parasites, bad teeth and gum problems, allergies and degenerative diseases can all be attributed to poor nutrition and overvaccination. Many of these ailments we've come to accept as normal, but they can be avoided altogether with a proper natural diet."

If Juliette Levy's book was my influence, why then didn't our dogs fare better? Because I didn't take the raw food philosophy as seriously as it has evolved today. Every now and then our dogs got a raw bone, but I still believed in cooking for them, and they probably did better on that diet than on a packaged and canned diet, but I wanted to see my dogs running with joy into old age until they dropped from natural old-age causes. Perhaps this is too much to ask, but it is not too much to expect to have healthy vibrant pets enjoying normal lives with us without being burdened by constant nagging ailments, and, not to mention, behavioral problems. After all, a dog that feels well is bound to behave well. Okay, so by now you're saying, "Oh, great, I've

spent years reeducating myself on a healthful diet, now I've got to do the same for my pets!" Well, why not? Most of us consider our pets part of our family, and if ever there was a wake-up call as to the quality of their food, it was the contaminated pet food from China that caused us to take a closer look. In a comprehensive article, "What's In Your Pet's Food," Tucson's Dr. Lisa Newman, N.D., Ph.D., founder of Holistic Pet Care, writes, "In the last few years, holistic veterinarians and animal nutritionists have concluded that many of today's health problems from allergies to cancer, even behavioral problems, can stem from poor nutrition..... and not the "table scraps," but the very prescription diets and premium foods highly recommended. It's a shame that you may be unknowingly creating the very problems that your animal has been suffering from!"

For starters, our best defense is label reading, and we should avoid any pet foods that list animal by-products, food colorings, salt and sugar, the preservatives, BHA and BHT as well as those long unpronounceable chemical names. Pet food manufacturers, for instance, with a true concern for health rather than for short-term profits, know the value of vitamins C and E as natural preservatives as opposed to the detrimental chemicals, BHA and BHT. And, if there is no time for preparing raw organic veggies and meat, there are many excellent holistic, human grade dry and canned foods readily available. While they generally cost more, without a doubt they're worth it and can be found, not at the big box giants, but at smaller local businesses. To delve more deeply into the facts concerning quality and cost, every pet owner should read and keep as reference, an excellent piece of informative journalism by a local writer, Leah Wheeler, which appeared in May 2008 in the "Tucson Green Magazine" titled, "How to Choose Healthy Pet Food."

With just a little forethought and organization, pets can easily be fed a raw food diet. Since we focus on organic as much as possible, that is what our dogs get and almost any vegetable is great for them too. While there are any number of ways to go, here is a quick and easy example. Into the blender go some chopped zucchini, carrots, celery, broccoli, spinach, parsley, avocado (in any variations and depending on what you have on hand, or what is in season and available) and garlic (a natural preventive for numerous maladies including worms) along with olive oil (flax oil and fish oil are great too) a little kelp powder, adding purified water as the blend needs to be liquefied, and presto, this is stored in the refrigerator to be used daily and mixed with pre frozen meat, preferably grass-fed (no added hormones, antibiotics or other drugs). What works well for us is a raw vegetable blend mixed with chunks of meat a few times a week with the meat replaced by dry food at times. Since meat is such a concentrated food, and since animals in the wild do not bring down prey every day, some suggest a day or two per week with no meat. Levy sees minced meat as harmful to animals, as opposed to chunks of raw meat. If this is a turn-off to vegetarians or vegans, and there are those who argue that other animals should not suffer for the sake of our animals, they can still be fed a healthy diet of, for instance, the raw veggies mixed with brown rice, oatmeal, barley, and/or dry food. Bones are given a few times per week and do wonders for exercising those canine jaws as well as keeping the teeth sparkling. When in doubt as to how much grain, meat or vegetables, strive for balance; too much of any one food is probably not the best. For example, if I've used some brown rice mixed in my dogs' food, I'll cut back on grains for a while, then the next time, I may mix in some barley, a natural blood cleanser, or some oatmeal. Organic flaked oats can be found in bulk at a very reasonable price, and it doesn't need cooking. Just pour hot water over the oats and let sit a while until it

bulks up---almost the same for barley. For dessert, our dogs get half an organic apple or pear or any fruit. For breakfast, they love a mashed up banana with a little ground up flax or chia seed, some yogurt or coconut milk and sometimes an egg mixed in.

One of the reasons for so much confusion on the food front is that new discoveries are always under way. Years ago I had never thought of corn as being detrimental to an animal, but today there is research showing that corn is just that, and yet you will find corn and wheat as the top ingredients in less expensive pet foods, and not find these cheaper fillers at all in top quality foods. Juliette Levy, on the other hand, felt cereals or grains to be of immense importance, but her idea of these grains is fresh and organic, rather than chemically grown and preserved. What is the answer, then, if some believe that only raw meaty bones are the best diet while others cannot deal with meat, and still others have time only for dry food? Quality and balance. Quality should always have top priority, and while that usually means more expensive products, we might just have to start changing our American mindset. As Michael Pollan cites in his book, *In Defense of Food*, “A hallmark of the Western diet is food that is fast, cheap, and easy. Americans spend less than 10 percent of their income on food.” He goes on to say that “Traditionally people have allocated a far greater proportion of their income to food---as they still do in several of the countries where people eat better than we do and as a consequence are healthier than we are.” And, his footnote here: “Compared to the 9.9 percent of their income Americans spend on food, the Italians spend 14.9 percent, the French 14.9 percent, and the Spanish 17.1 percent.”

Here are some general tips for a healthier dog, and while my personal experience has been with dogs, most of the literature shows much of the same common sense attitudes prevailing for cats as well.

1. stainless and ceramic water and food bowls vs. plastic---Invest in the best. Stainless is non-reactive and lasts forever. Ceramic is great but can break. Well, we all know about plastic.
2. water-----Give your pet the same filtered water that you drink. They don't need the chlorination and other chemicals either. Yes, they do drink dirty water in puddles occasionally, but it's our daily routine that makes the difference.
3. peppermint oil---Always have a bottle on hand for eliminating fleas and ticks, which drop by the hundreds on instant contact---it seems to suffocate them. Some may remember that great old hippie soap, Dr. Bronner's liquid peppermint soap. It's great for bathing dogs; parasites hate it. And, no, it doesn't dry the dog's skin if the dog's diet contains quality oils.
4. diatomaceous earth---Food grade diatomaceous earth is a white powder that is very effective as both an internal and external parasite control. This is like the magic potion for fighting nature with nature rather than with chemicals. Derived from the remains of microscopic one-celled plants (diatoms or algae), it is made up of sharp spines that have the ability to pierce the chitin, or armor-like coating of insects, thereby dehydrating and

killing them. We have used it successfully as a termite preventive for years. For pets it must be "food grade" as opposed to what is used for pool filters