

Holistic Veterinary Nutrition/Food Therapy

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Appropriate nutrition is one of the single most important factors influencing the health of our companion animals. Unfortunately, over the past 30 to 40 years the practice of feeding dry kibble diets has had a negative effect on the health and well-being of our pets.

The Start of Grain-Based Diets

Around World War II, the production of grain- and cereal-based “kibble” diets became popular because of the socio-economic situation at that time. There was scarcely enough food to feed the humans on the planet. Faced with the potential for large scale resources to feed them, a grain-based diet (supplemented with other by-products, such as fish heads and chicken feet) was proposed as a short-term measure. This short-term measure effectively became ingrained in the way commercial pet food was processed and continue to this day, largely due to economic considerations.

Animal Diets Then and Now

I frequently question clients about what animals ate for hundreds or thousands of years before we had kibble diets. After a little thought, the answer is usually a resounding: “What we ate – REAL food.” Long before the term “complete and balanced” was used to describe animal nutrition, our companion animals thrived. They thrived because they achieved balance through variety and diversity in what they consumed over time. Our grandparents did not have the incidence of cancer or other degenerative diseases in their pets that we do now. The current conventional veterinary assertion is that: “Animals are living longer and therefore developing diseases that our ancestors didn’t appreciate.” The reality of the situation is that animals lived as long, if not longer, with fewer problems of cancer at young ages. In this day and age, unfortunately most veterinarians are taught and believe that dry kibble diets are better for pets than “real” food. Most people are fearful about not feeding dry kibble food recommended by their vet, thinking this will cause problems or lead to deficiencies. In response to this, I recommend you consider the following scenario. You take your newborn child to the pediatrician. The doctor suggest that you feed one “complete and balanced” processed diet to your child every day, day in and day out, for the rest of his or her life. I hazard to guess that most everyone would feel this is not an appropriate nutritional plan for their child. Why should it be any different for your dog or cat?

The Right Diet for Your Animals

When considering nutrition from a holistic perspective, I feel that there is no one right way to feed all of our companion animals. Each individual animal needs to be considered based on their underlying constitution, age, energy level, deficiencies, and needs. Over the past 10 to 20 years there has been a huge movement toward feeding raw food diets. I think this is a very positive shift in how we look at feeding our pets, yet I feel that a raw food diet is not for every animal. A raw or BARF (Biologically Available Raw Food) diet is great for a strong, young animal without any appreciable deficiencies. Feeding a raw meat diet to a geriatric patient with concurrent problems is not the optimal way to feed this particular animal. If you feed an energetically cold, damp raw food diet to a deficient patient, they are required to use a substantial amount of Qi (energy) to heat up that food and start the process of digestion. By feeding a cooked food to this patient you are kick-starting the digestion process for them, thus the animal does not have to use as much energy to extract the Gu Qi (food/energy) out of the food.

What is Food Therapy?

Food therapy is the utilization of food as medicine. A therapeutic diet is formulated based on the condition of the individual patient. A classic example of the application of food therapy would be as follows: Scruffy is a dog with bad allergies. He itches a lot and has inflamed skin with crusting/oozing lesions that smell. He seems to be hot all the time. He pants, lies on the cool tile floor, likes to drink a lot of water, and seeks the shade. Essentially, Scruffy has a lot of heat in his body. In addition to addressing this problem with acupuncture and herbs, food therapy can be very helpful in alleviating Scruffy’s discomfort.

An Example of Food Therapy

To address Scruffy’s condition, I would recommend Scruffy avoid any dry food (the more processed the diet, the more heat that is generated) and focus on feeding cooling foods (fresh turkey, fish, green veggies, fruit) while avoiding hot foods (lamb, venison). By addressing the underlying problem from multiple aspects, including appropriate nutrition, we have the best potential for curing many of the problems commonly encountered in veterinary medicine.

It is also important to note that when feeding a home-prepared diet, it is imperative to supplement with calcium and a good quality multi-vitamin.

Home-Prepared Diets: General Guidelines

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When you make a home-prepared diet for your animal companions, there are three key basics to know and follow.

The 3 Basics

1. Variety and Diversity
2. Balance over time
3. Basic Supplementation
 - a. Calcium
 - b. Multi-vitamin
 - c. Omega fatty acids

One of the most important things to remember is that none of us eats a “complete and balanced” diet at every single meal. Yet over time, we balance our diet by eating a variety of different foods. By eating an appropriate mix of proteins, complex carbohydrates (whole grains and roots), vegetables, and fruits this can be accomplished.

Dogs and Cats: What They Need

Dogs and cats have specific evolutionary requirements that are different than their human caretakers. Dogs have evolved as omnivorous carnivores. They thrive on mostly meat and organ-type proteins with fats, and lesser amounts of carbohydrates in the form of complex carbohydrates, vegetables, and fruit. Most dogs do very well on a home-prepared diet of at least 50% protein. Complex carbohydrates such as whole grains and roots make up 25% and vegetables make up 25%. This is very much a general guideline and the diet is adjusted based on the individual species, breed, and animal. Cats are more purely carnivorous and need to be nourished accordingly. Cereal grain based diets sprayed with animal digests (also known as ‘kitty crack’) do not qualify as a carnivore’s sustenance. Most cats benefit from a diet of at least 75% protein with 10% grains and roots and 15% vegetables and fruits.

It is very important to remember that cats evolved from Northern Africa, very much a desert climate. They have very strong urine concentrating ability which supports their ability to conserve as much fluid as possible. This situation is worsened by feeding them a highly processed (which adds heat), dry, yin-depleting food. This may help to explain the incidence of renal failure in teenage cats. Imagine if they were fed moisture rich, wholesome meats, grains/roots and veggies. I feel these cats would live into their twenties and beyond.

“If you feed the same home cooked diet, day in and day out, without variety and diversity, you may as well be feeding a bad kibble diet.”

Take It Slow

Transitioning an animal to a home-prepared diet needs to be done slowly. I tell all my clients this: “START SLOWLY.” I understand it is exciting to have a whole new world at your disposal to help your animal friend. Yet you must remember that there is a strong possibility that they may not be ready (mentally or physically) for an abrupt change to their diets. Many cats will be very unhappy with the transition and it needs to be done very slowly. ALL CAT OWNERS MUST VISIT THIS WEBSITE:

www.catinfo.org. Some animals may be diarrhea or vomiting if

the transition is not made slowly enough. Watch for any gastrointestinal (GI) sensitivity to certain foods. If there is an increase in itchiness or GI problems analyze what was in the food that you prepared them. A food tolerance trial may be indicated.

How Much to Feed

The quality of food you should feed varies with the individual animal. A good starting point is to feed 2.5 to 3.5% of body weight. Monitor body condition every 1 to 2 weeks. This is done by feeling for ribs (feeling them is good, seeing them is not), and looking for a waist. Adjust the amount of food by 10% every 1 to 2 weeks based on your pet’s body condition.

The All-Important Calcium

It is absolutely imperative to supplement a home-prepared diet with a bioavailable source of **calcium**. I recommend calcium citrate at 1000-1500 mg per pound of meat. This is dosed based on the amount of meat because skeletal muscle is high in phosphorous and the calcium is added to try to attain a calcium to protein ratio of 1.5 to 1. If the home-prepared diet is being fed raw with ground bones then on additional calcium needs to be added. If your animal is getting raw meaty bones only 1 to 2 times per week, however, I would still recommend supplementing the diet with calcium.

Additional Supplements

It is always a good idea to supplement your home-prepared diet with a good quality multivitamin mineral supplement as a stopgap measure, in case there is a deficiency brewing. Great supplements include:

Omega Fatty Acids:

- Sardines (in spring water) – “a sardine a day keeps the vet away”
- Salmon (canned/wild caught)
- Fish oil
- Flax seed oil
- Cod liver oil
- DHA

Green Foods:

- Kelp
- Spirulina
- Chlorella

Conclusion

Conditions ranging from cancer and liver problems to cardiac and kidney disease can be influenced by appropriate nutrition. There are patients with allergic, neurological, and arthritic problems that may also benefit from food therapy. Some animals feel better with less protein and more starches while other need higher protein level to achieve optimal health. The art of food therapy comes from tailoring a diet to the individual patient. I suggest consulting with a veterinarian who is comfortable working with you on a home-prepared diet.

Sample Crock Pot Recipe

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Now that you've decided to begin cooking nutritious meals for your dog or cat, you may want to try this sample recipe. This is one of the recipes I use at home, and I provide this information as a resource to help folks get started preparing food for their own animals. You can substitute proteins, grains and veggies from the list on the following pages. While the proportions do not have to be exact, it is important to weigh or measure the ingredients using a measuring cup or kitchen scale to get as close as you can to the right mix of protein, complex carbohydrates, and veggies.

Ingredients

- 4 lbs. protein (chicken, beef, turkey, ect.)
- 1 ½ cups grains
- 1 pound (2 ½ cups) sweet potato or yam
- 2 ½ to 3 cups finely chopped veggies, you can use a food chopper or food processor. (I tend to choose green leafy veggies such as spinach, broccoli, kale, as well as couple of veggies of different colors)

Preparation and Cooking Procedure

1. Place about 3 to 4 cups of water in the crock pot (only if using grains).
2. Add the gains first, to the bottom of the pot.
3. Rotate layers of chicken, chopped veggies, and sweet potato to the pot.
4. Make sure the grains stay toward the bottom to ensure they absorb the water.
5. When all ingredients are in the pot, cover with water. Be sure to leave approximately 1/2" at the top to allow room for moisture generated during cooking.
6. Turn on cooker to the low setting for 8-10 hours.
7. When food is finished cooking, remove bones from chicken.
8. Add 1000-1500 mg of calcium citrate per pound of meat.
9. Mix well and let cool.
10. Place food into containers which can be refrigerated or frozen.
11. Feed at least 2.5 to 3.5% of body weight per day. For example 20# = approximately ½ to ¾ lbs daily, split between meals.

Feeding Your Pets Their New Diet

Adding in the Supplements – At feeding time, add the multi-vitamin, omega fatty acids, and green food source (preferably ocean kelp for its iodine content). It is important to keep variety and diversity in proteins, grains and vegetables. Don't get stuck in a rut and feed the same recipe day in and day out. This is a sure way to develop deficiencies.

Monitor Your Progress – Monitor your cat or dog's body condition every 1-2 weeks and adjust the amount you are feeding them to meet their body's requirements. Every animal is different. If you feel your pet is becoming too thin, feed them 10% more. Or if they seem to get gaining weight, feed them 10 % less, and then reassess the change in 1-2 weeks.

Food Therapy

Protein:

- Beef
- Chicken
- Turkey
- Liver: Beef, Chicken, Turkey
- Heart: Beef, Chicken, Turkey
- Gizzards
- Raw Necks: Chicken, Turkey
- Raw Bones: Beef marrow bones
- White fish: flounder, cod, grouper (preferably wild caught)
- Oily fish (blood tonics): sardines (in spring water), salmon (canned Alaskan)
- Eggs: Hard or soft boiled (try for free range/organic)
- Lamb
- Venison
- Cheese/Yogurt

} Add in 2-3 times a week only or every other batch of food

} Do not cook

Complex Carbohydrates:

Grains

- Whole rolled oats
- Barley: whole, pearled or Chinese (yi yi ren/coix)
- Quinoa/Millet
- Rice: brown

Roots

- Sweet Potato/Yam
- Roots: turnip, beets, yucca

Veggies (Chopped fine, fresh, is optimal, then frozen):

- Green Beans/Asparagus
- Zucchini, yellow squash, cucumber, tomato, carrots
- Hearty greens: Chinese cabbage, bok choy, kale, broccoli, spinach
- Leafy greens: romaine, dandelion greens, spring salad/herb mix
- Pungent: radish, daikon radish, scallion

Fruits:

- Apples, pears, melons
- pineapple, papaya, apricot, blueberries

Note: When feeding a home prepared diet, it is imperative to supplement with calcium and a good quality multi-vitamin.