My Point of View on Raw vs. Cooked Meats for Pets

By Randy Kidd, DVM, PhD
Holistic Veterinarian
PetStyle.com

I am a big advocate for feeding pets raw meats instead of the cooked variety, and so, too, are most of the holistic veterinarians I know. At first, having been given the routine nutritional info in veterinary school (woefully inadequate, and in my day all of it was provided by -- what a surprise -- the big pet food companies) that foods needed to be cooked to be safe and nutritious, I was hesitant to recommend raw meats. I finally listened to my holistic peer group and began to tell clients about the advantages of adding good-quality raw meat to their pets' diets. Then I stood back to observe the results.

I continue to be amazed by the number of my patients that have experienced clinical improvement after raw meat was added to their diet. Oftentimes, just a tablespoon or so every day has produced dramatic effects. Perhaps the most noticeable of the effects is a healthier-appearing skin and hair coat. Many of the itchy skin problems simply disappear with the addition of meat. Even other diseases often seem to improve -- diseases you wouldn't expect to be affected by adding meat: arthritis, urinary tract conditions, chronic inflammatory bowel syndrome, hormonal problems such as diabetes, hyperthyroid in cats or hypothyroid in dogs, and many others.

Not all disease conditions improve with the addition of raw meat, but it happens often enough that I laughingly tell folks I hate to recommend such a simple cure – a cure that probably won't allow me to fully express my own magical healing powers.

I'm not totally sure I understand ***why*** raw meats are so good for our pets, but some of the ideas below may be all or part of the reason:

Processing, and especially cooking, destroys nutrients. Heating, freezing, dehydrating, canning, extruding, pelleting, baking, and so forth, are so commonplace that they are simply thought of as synonymous with food itself. The processing practices for grain and meat used in pet food severely diminish their nutritional value. For example, cooking destroys many vitamins. Depending on the temperatures used, up to 80 to 90% of some vitamins originally in the foods can be lost in the cooking process.

In addition, commercial foods may undergo several cooking steps in the manufacturing process, with each cooking step further decreasing the nutrients available to a pet consuming the food. If you home-cook your pet's foods, you will likely never reach the extreme temperatures attained in the manufacturing process, nor will you re-cook the food several times.

Interestingly, one of the reasons given for excess cooking is that it will destroy the bacteria in the meat. However, much of the bacterial contamination present in the "raw materials" of the commercial diets is because of bacterial contamination of the original food sources (Meat removed from infected animals can be used for pet foods, and meat sources may sit for days before they are added to the pet food mix, adding to the chance they will be contaminated by outside sources of bacteria.).

Interestingly, most of the types of contaminants that can severely injure or kill – such as the toxins produced by bacteria and fungi, and apparently rat poison and plastic/pesticide residues -- are not destroyed by heating anyway, no matter how high the temperature.

If you know the source of the meat you will feed your pet, and if you use the safe meat-handling techniques we all know, there is little reason to cook the meat (Safe handling techniques include washing your hands before and after handling meat, keeping cutting and preparation surfaces and pets' food bowls clean and disinfected, keeping the meats refrigerated or freezing them if they will not be used for three or four days.).

Furthermore, there have been several long-term feeding trials comparing raw diets to cooked, and while we might be able to argue some with the precise methodology of the trials, there is no question that the animals fed raw diets did much better than those fed cooked foods.

Finally, there is the intrinsic factor -- or the concern about the "vitality" of the foods. Many of us, as holistic practitioners, feel that there is, or should be, a vitality that comes from within healthy foods. Many of us feel that, with cooking, these vitally innate essentials are destroyed … which makes the food intrinsically less vital or wholesome. This is perhaps too "Woo Woo" for some, but it is something to think about, nonetheless.

And so, for several reasons, there is a concern among some of us that overcooked foods lack the total nutrient package required to keep our pets healthy. Of equal concern is the notion that cooked foods may contain extras that are not only not beneficial for health, but may even instigate disease.

A quick read of the label on many of the pet foods on the market should make you highly suspect of the quality of foods that go into them. You'll note that the primary nutrient sources (including protein) in many pet foods are cereals and grains. What's more, the primary source of meat protein may be ground up carcasses or worse. Our primarily carnivorous dogs and cats are better adapted to meat sources for their protein … just adding fresh, healthy meat to a commercial diet helps tip the balance to a more healthy meat source of protein.

The label will also give you a hint about some of the junk that may have been added: synthetic preservatives (BHA, BHT, ethoxyquin), coloring agents, artificial flavors, non-nutritive and nutritive sweeteners, anti-caking agents, lubricants, antimicrobial agents, oxidizing and reducing agents, curing agents, pH control agents, drying agents, processing aids, emulsifiers, sequestrants, firming agents, solvents, flavor enhancers, stabilizers, thickeners, flavoring agents, surface active agents, flour treating agents, surface finishing agents, formulation aids, synergists, humectants, texturizers, and leavening agents.

According to one report I've seen, of the more than 8,600 recognized food additives today, no toxicity information is available for 46% of them. Cancer-causing agents are sometimes permitted if they are used at low enough levels. So, while most of the additives have absolutely no nutritive value (they are used to enhance the processing of the foods), some may actually cause or precipitate disease. Holistic veterinarians are especially concerned about the use of the preservatives BHA, BHT, and Ethoxyquin.

In addition to creating a direct potential for harm, there is the potential for contamination with each and every non-essential food source that is added to the pet food package (as we've seen with the current food recall case, in which the poison or toxin likely came in on wheat gluten, a filler with almost no nutritive value). And each of the many steps along the assembly line of the pet food making process creates the possibility for contamination with potential toxins – contamination from plastics or heavy metals that are present in the machinery that manufactures the food.

Now, while this litany of junk and potentially bad-guy stuff that's in many of the packaged foods on the market does not relate directly to the raw foods vs. cooked debate, they offer some perspective for why I personally consider the potential risks from raw foods much less a problem than the potential for harm that comes from processed, cooked foods.

Potential for Harm

On the other hand, raw foods, especially raw meats, also have the potential for being harmful … at least according to the experts from the commercial food industry, and there are many veterinarians who also feel uncomfortable recommending raw meats. There are two major areas of concern when feeding raw meats: 1) Will they hurt my pet? And 2) Can a pet that is eating raw meats pass something on to a human member of the family?

There is always the potential for picking up a bacterial infection from contaminated meat that has not been cooked. However, our dogs and cats (and all carnivores) have digestive systems that are especially adapted with the ability to consume tainted meats without harming themselves. Think for a moment about the dead and decaying stuff you've seen your pet (or the neighbor's pet) gnawing on – the stuff he's dragged up from the far reaches of the playground or the back of your lot is the same stuff his ancestors have been chewing on for eons, without apparent harm.

Interestingly, most of the hand wringing about the safety of raw meats comes from the ***speculation*** that infections are possible, and in theory, they are. If you search hard enough you can find a few documented cases of animals being infected through contaminated raw meat, but the confirmed cases are few and far between – certainly not what you'd expect if it were a huge problem, especially considering the popularity of raw meat diets nowadays.

An interesting sidebar here is to think back to the bacterial infections that began to occur several years ago in racing greyhounds, apparently from eating raw meats contaminated with E. coli. When these cases first came out there was speculation about the role that previous antibiotic use had on the occurrence and the severity of the disease, now called "Alabama Rot" (Almost all greyhounds have been given hefty doses of antibiotics.). As time has gone on, however, I haven't heard much more about the possible role of antibiotic use in the likelihood that a bacterial infection will occur later on. I wonder how it happened that no one followed up on this very plausible speculation, and I further wonder how much effect the previous use of antibiotics has on the potential for food-borne bacterial diseases in our general populations of pets.

Furthermore, there is no assurance that your packaged food will be bacteria free – in one examination that compared raw foods with processed commercial foods, many of

the commercial raw food diets contained bacteria … but so did some of the dried and cooked, processed foods (In this particular analysis, only two dry food diets were tested, with “a few” of the samples containing E. coli bacteria … which made me wonder: What percentage of two is “a few”?).

Of equal concern is the safety of the human family, and it is true that an infected pet could infect the family with bacteria and/or parasites, almost always through fecal contamination. Once again, however, it is difficult to find confirmed cases of animals that were infected via eating raw meat and then passed on the infection to human family members. So, while the danger exists, one wonders how severe the problem is. And, since meat-borne infections are mostly passed in the feces, good hygiene habits (wash your hands and don’t eat feces) will help you avoid them.

Summary:

Bottom line -- and this is what I have told my clients for years now: If at all possible, home-prepare your pet’s foods. If this is totally impractical (and I realize home-cooking takes a considerable commitment to the time and effort required), feed the very best food you can find and stir in some additional meat for the health of it. In all cases (home-cooked diets or when you add meat to a packaged food), use fresh, high-quality, low-fat meat -- and whenever possible, use organic meats so you don’t have to worry about the hormones and antibiotics used to rear conventional meats nor the pesticides and herbicides used to grow the feed that is fed to conventional meat sources.

I am personally convinced that raw meats are the most beneficial for the health of a pet, but if you don’t feel comfortable feeding raw, at least add some lightly-cooked meat to the highest quality food you can find.

There will always be some danger that problems could result from feeding raw meats, but (as explained above) this danger is very slight at worst … and to my way of thinking, the potential for harm from raw meats is far less than that from feeding poor quality, cooked and packaged foods.

Finally, recognize that if you choose to use one of the “all-meat” diets that are currently popular, it will be more difficult to balance the necessary nutrients – adding some good quality, whole grains and vitamins and minerals may be the easiest way to help balance the nutrient requirements, as well as a way to cut costs.
