Commercial Vs. Homemade Pet Diet

One of the most common questions our clients ask us is related to their pets’ food. Due to the advent of Internet searches, commercial brand pet food recalls and pet owners’ obsession with treating pets as family members, some owners are switching to homemade cooked diets and raw diets. As we move towards a more health conscious society, some pet owners are beginning to wonder if commercially available dog food is the right choice for their pets.

A quick Internet search reveals that there are a number of people who support the movement away from commercially available dog food towards that of a raw diet. These diets, however, must be formulated with some nutritional knowledge concerning your pet. They must be balanced with the essential minerals, vitamins, proteins, and fat. Also, what works for one pet may not be adequate for another, since pets are all different. There may be differences in the size, breed, age, and lifestyle. Furthermore, all homemade and raw diets are not the same.

Advantages to Raw Pet Diets

A possible advantage to a raw diet is that when the meals are prepared in a safe and balanced way, your pet benefits in health and appearance. When the correct ingredients are added into the diet, such as health supplements and other nutrients, your pet may seem more energetic and have a long, happy life. Another benefit to a raw diet is that, as the guardian of your pet, there will be no questions surrounding the content origin of your dog’s meals. On the other hand, significant and sometimes irreversible health effects could occur if your pets are not fed a balanced diet.

Disadvantages to Homemade and Raw Pet Diets

The most common problem we see with homemade and raw diets is with calcium and phosphorous rations or improper ratios. This leads to a syndrome called nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism, which is most common in young large breed dogs between 2 and 4 months of age. This occurs when these pets are fed a diet that is low in calcium or improper calcium: phosphorous ratio. Low calcium in the diet or the inability to absorb calcium from the gastrointestinal tract leads to a release of the parathyroid hormone (PTH) from the parathyroid gland. As a result, absorption of calcium from the bones is stimulated, which is the opposite of what should happen in growing patients. The calcium requirements for young animals are high, since they are building bone. Taking calcium out of the bones because the blood calcium level is low leads to brittle and fragile bones. Calcium is also required for muscle function. Therefore, puppies developing nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism from unbalanced raw or cooked diets will exhibit signs including muscle weakness, difficulty walking, lameness and possible pathological fractures of the long bones. (See pictures below for an example of a pathological fracture.)
Another simple, yet often overlooked, shortcoming of the raw diet is the threat to the health of the owner. If the meat being used to feed your pet is not properly handled or cleaned, there is a significant chance that you can contract a slew of food borne illnesses, including Salmonella poisoning.

**How to Safely Prepare Homemade and Raw Diets**

These homemade cooked and raw diets could be fed to young pets as long as they have adequate amounts of nutrients and are balanced. It has been suggested that treats and unbalanced foods should not comprise more than 10% of your pet’s diet. Owners can go the route of custom diets, but it is recommended that they contain all the nutritional requirements. Information on daily nutritional requirements is published by the National Research Center (NRC). Also a number of veterinary specialty practices and universities offer nutritional counseling.

The species, breed, age, lifestyle, and any pre-existing health issues must be taken into consideration when formulating a diet for your pet. So in the end, if you are thinking of switching or even starting your pet on a raw food diet, understand the potential risks and discuss your plan with your veterinarian.