

Questions Answered About Creating Healthy, Happy Pets

Today I'm answering questions submitted on our online platforms from our special Creating Healthy, Happy Pets Week. Find answers here to your questions on vaccines, omega-3s, parasites, trachea issues, CBD, detox, the ideal way to feed your pet (including kitties with kidney disease) and much more.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It's day five of bark & whiskers Creating Healthy, Happy Pets Week 2023, and instead of a guest interview, today I'm answering questions submitted by many of you — followers of bark & whiskers and my social media channels (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms)

Welcome to day five of bark & whiskers Creating Healthy, Happy Pets Week 2023! This week I'm focusing on the many different aspects of pets' physical, mental, and emotional well-being, and I'll be interviewing a wide range of experts in nutrition, behavior, enrichment, exercise, and physical rehabilitation.

Today, instead of a guest interview, I'm answering questions submitted by the wonderful bark & whiskers communities on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms.

Below are some of the highlights of the Q&A, but I encourage you to watch the full video and/or download and read the transcript, both of which are linked above, for much more detail and information.

First, a Bit of Housekeeping

Before we start, I want to remind all of you that I can't, for legal reasons, give personalized veterinary advice. So, I'll be answering your questions in general terms about topics you submitted. Like all veterinarians in the U.S., in order to give you specific medical advice, I must examine your animal in person, which is obviously not possible in this forum.

If you don't have local access to a proactive integrative or wellness veterinarian, there are several international platforms or associations that many integrative proactive wellness veterinarians belong to, for example, the **College of Integrative Veterinary Therapies**. CIVT is an online educational association that I and many of my integrative colleagues belong to.

The state I reside in doesn't permit veterinary telemedicine consultations, but many veterinarians around the world are able to offer that service. If you'd like to partner with a proactive veterinarian, but you don't have one on your pet's medical team, you can do a telehealth visit with one or more wonderful integrative veterinarians who are available specifically for one-on-one consultations.

Q&A

Question from Anthony M: "Hello. I am currently training as a canine handler with a Belgian Malinois. I have been researching the best ways to keep him healthy all around, like heart health, stomach, joints, and I see that feeding raw food is the best way. What product should I feed him when it comes to raw? And is there a specific site I should buy from or should I buy the meat myself and grind it up at home?"

Dr. Becker: There are high quality commercially available raw food diets you can purchase, and there are excellent recipes you can follow and make the meals at home. I do both, but I love making homemade food because I have control over the ingredients. I can choose my dog Homer's meat and veggies and fruit. I have full control over the raw ingredients. When I'm too busy to shop or cook, I do buy commercially available raw foods.

But whether we're talking raw or fresh food diets, the vast majority of people who prepare homemade diets guess at a recipe. And I must agree with my conventional veterinary colleagues that it's really important that you don't guess at a recipe. So, if you want to do homemade food, number one is to follow a nutritionally complete recipe to make sure that you're meeting your dog's minimum nutrient requirements.

Secondly, there's no one perfect recipe or perfect company making a perfect diet for your dog because research is very clear that the benefits of fresh feeding and any diet is the diversity in the types of foods that you're offering your pet. Also, just as with ultraprocessed pet foods, there are good, better, best, and then average, bad, and terrible quality raw, dehydrated, gently cooked and freeze-dried pet diets.

It's important that you trust the company producing the pet foods you buy, which means you're going to visit the company website to see who formulated the food, and most importantly, for every one of their products, the company should be able to confidently offer you a complete nutritional analysis.

Many if not most veterinarians say, "Never feed a homemade diet." I say, feed a homemade diet because it's the best quality food your dog or cat will ever eat. However, make sure you're following a **nutritionally complete recipe**.

Question from Cat G: "Is mint toxic to cats and dogs?"

Dr. Becker: No, mint isn't toxic for cats (or dogs). Catnip is actually in the mint family. And if your cat doesn't respond to catnip, try silver vine. About 30% of cats don't respond to catnip, but some of those may respond to silver vine. Neither catnip nor silver vine are toxic, and neither is mint.

I grow fresh mint to use in the kitchen, and also in my iced tea. Both my cat and dog nibble my mint from the garden and it's a-okay. Where you can get into trouble is with essential oils. I am not a fan of using essential oils with cats without veterinary supervision or in dilution from an aromatherapist and oil company that you know is cat-friendly.

The only herbs you should stay away from are chives, leeks, onions, and members of the onion family. My kitty nibbles on marjoram, thyme, basil, mint, lemon grass, and lemon balm. Most herbs are just fine for dogs and cats, and allowing them to self-select fresh herbs (except those noted above) is a great idea.

Question from Ingrid M: "Do you have a cookbook of human grade food or raw food for dogs and cats?"

Dr. Becker: I actually just submitted the manuscript for book number two. Those of you who follow me on social media and here at bark & whiskers (formerly Healthy Pets) may know that my co-writer, Rodney Habib and I authored The Forever Dog. It reached number one on the New York Times bestseller list, which we were not anticipating, and it's the only pet health book in the world to do so. That tells you the power of dogs and how important they are to people!

This next book is a cookbook and all of the recipes are nutritionally complete. They're for active cats, less active cats, active dogs, less active dogs, and growing puppies. It should be available in May 2024 through Harper & Collins. Any foods that you buy for your own consumption are human grade. Because this is a book with hundreds of recipes, you'll be able to go to your grocery store, buy the ingredients, or get them from your farmer's market and make a wide variety of nutritionally complete recipes for your dog or cat.

Question from Joanna M: "Is kale good for your pet?"

Dr. Becker: Kale is great, and not just kale, but all dark green leafies. As I mentioned earlier, the only things you want to avoid from the garden are chives and onions, but all those dark, green, colorful leafies are really good for your dog and your cat if he or she will eat them. Animals genetically prone to calcium oxalate bladder stones should consume cooked kale, which reduces oxalates substantially. Cats aren't much into roughage, unless they're deficient in fiber.

Question from Christine: "What should I feed my cat with kidney disease?"

Dr. Becker: There are four stages of kidney disease. The IRIS, the International Renal Interest Society, uses human kidney disease category markers for pets as well. Stage one is the most mild and stage four is pulmonic kidney failure. We assess stages of kidney disease by urine and blood work, so hopefully your cat has been assessed.

The general consensus among veterinarians is that we don't restrict protein until stages three and four. Unfortunately, some conventional veterinarians react immediately to elevated SDMA or protein in the urine and put cats on a low protein diet. However, we know that felines are obligate carnivores. They need a lot of fresh, whole, unadulterated, good quality protein to nourish their bodies, including supportive kidney structures. So it's not that protein is bad or evil, it's that the quality of protein is really important.

If you're feeding a typical canned or dry cat food, the quality of protein is probably not good. I recommend switching to a human grade pet food if you can afford it. Also, kitties need a high moisture diet, so they need to be transitioned to a canned food at a minimum, and better still, a fresh or gently cooked human grade diet.

There are also amino acid supplements, as well as renal supportive nutraceuticals, homeopathics, western herbs, eastern herbs, and ayurvedic herbs that can help preserve your cat's remaining kidney function.

Question from Jay Ann: "What vaccines are mandatory?"

Dr. Becker: In the U.S., the only vaccine required by law is the **rabies vaccine**. There are one-year and three-year rabies vaccines. They're the same product, just licensed differently. I always recommend the three-year vaccine, because that means many fewer vaccines over the lifetime of your pet.

Many veterinarians require **additional vaccines** for any patient who is treated in their clinic or hospital. If this is the case with your vet, and you don't feel repetitive boosters of vaccines against, for example, parvo and distemper are warranted, ask for a serum **antibody titer test** to determine your dog's level of protection against those diseases. A positive titer indicates your pet remains protected and doesn't require another vaccine.

Like all pharmaceuticals, vaccines have side effects, so agreeing to only those your pet truly needs (other than for rabies, which again, is required by law) is the best way to keep him or her protected against disease, but without the unnecessary **risk of over vaccinating**.

Question from Sarah B: "Diatomaceous earth orally for parasites and other benefits, pros or cons?"

Dr. Becker: Diatomaceous earth is actually ground up, microscopic sea organisms that create microtrauma to soft bodied insects and parasites. If they come in contact with fleas or ticks or worms, they create abrasions in the exoskeleton of the parasite, causing it to dry up and die. It's very effective. I much prefer diatomaceous earth for external use rather than internal use, to get rid of fleas and ticks, and lice as well.

Just don't apply it to your pet's head because if diatomaceous earth makes contact with the eyes, it can cause permanent damage. It also shouldn't be inhaled. Dust it onto your pet from the neck back, and nowhere near the head or face. I also don't recommend feeding it to pets, because it can create gastrointestinal (GI) inflammation.

Question from Dan: "You spoke on trachea issues with small dogs. Which of the products in your current catalog would be best for those recommendations?"

Dr. Becker: Tracheal collapse is a common issue with small dogs, and I recommend chondroprotective agents for that, such as MSM, glucosamine, and Perna mussel. Our Joint Support product for pets, even though the trachea is not a joint, provides the raw materials for cartilage repair, maintenance and support, and what your dog needs is tracheal support. The cartilage and the supportive structures within the trachea are weak, so offering cartilage support is a really good idea.

If your pet is seafood-sensitive and can't have Perna mussel, Dr. Mercola has a human MSM product that provides hypoallergenic cartilage support.

Question from Melissa C: "Best supplements for chronic pancreatitis? Dog fed commercial raw. I'm located in Canada."

Dr. Becker: Melissa, if you don't know about my Canadian raw food project, please check it out. Canada is like the wild west when it comes to formulation. They don't have an AAFCO, an American Association of Animal Feed Control Officials that helps set minimum nutrient requirements, and they also don't have an FDA to enforce transparency. So Canadian pet food companies can claim a product is nutritionally complete and balanced when it isn't.

If you're feeding a Canadian-manufactured raw food diet, I recommend you call the company and ask for a complete nutritional analysis. You want to make sure the company is giving you a complete nutritional analysis vs. minimum nutrient requirements. When I asked the manufacturers of the top 13 most commonly fed raw foods produced in Canada for a nutritional analysis, most would not provide it, which is very troubling.

When it comes to supporting a dog with chronic pancreatitis, it's important to understand that it's the cooked fat that causes the problem. It's the advanced lipoxidation end products or ALEs that create pancreatitis and pancreas inflammation. Partner with one of the few really good raw pet food manufacturers in Canada and supply adequate roughage in the form of low-glycemic, high fiber veggies. In terms of supplements, the most important thing you can give is lipase or a digestive enzyme containing adequate amounts of lipase.

Question from Linda W: "Should I be adding salt to my dog's homemade diet?"

Dr. Becker: That really depends on the recipe you're using. For example, meals made with seafood are naturally high in salt. However, meals using chicken or beef typically do require salt unless you're adding a supplement that contains adequate sodium chloride. As I stressed earlier, it's important to follow a nutritionally complete recipe not only to ensure the salt content is correct, but also other nutrients such as iodine, vitamin E, zinc, magnesium, and manganese.

Also, the downside of multivitamins for dogs and cats is that none of them meet minimum nutrient requirements for vitamins and minerals. You can't give a multivitamin and feel covered, so just make sure you're following a recipe.

Question from Crystal E: "Can cats eat bone broth?"

Dr. Becker: They certainly can, and you can either make your own or buy it, but again — make sure there no onions in either a homemade broth or a store-bought broth. I actually love bone broth for both cats and dogs. For older kitties, it's soul food. It's also a great way to hydrate meals for a kibble-addicted cat. Add some warm bone broth to the dry food to add moisture to the meal and help decrease kidney stress over time.

Question from Sarah F: "Is there an alternative to omega-3s that isn't fish based?"

Dr. Becker: Vegetable sources of omega-3s like flax seed and chia seeds don't supply DHA or EPA, which are the two most important elements of omega-3s for dogs and cats. So, supplying plant-based omega-3s from sources such as hemp seeds, chia seeds, flax seeds or other popular vegetable oils doesn't provide those essential two ingredients: DHA and EPA.

There's a vegan non-ocean source of omega-3s called algal oil, from algae. Unfortunately, it doesn't supply a lot of EPA, but there should be some good products coming in the future. In fact, I'm working with a Canadian company that is developing a high EPA and DHA strain of algae. But for now, your best bet is to supply algal oil for humans to your pet. It's also important to add omega-3 oils at feeding time, since they are very sensitive to heat, light and storage, so they should be added right at mealtime.

Question from May A: "Is it okay to give my kitty some kombucha mixed in with their food?"

Dr. Becker: You certainly can, if your cat will accept it! Kombucha is a fermented carbonated beverage. You want to make sure to choose plain kombucha if you're purchasing a commercial product. You also want to look carefully at the label to ensure the kombucha doesn't contain added sugars. It also shouldn't be one of the weirder flavors out there (e.g., cola).

Kombucha is a great source of gut building prebiotics. Dogs typically love it, cats not so much. My recommendation is to make or buy plain kombucha, and start with small amounts, like a teaspoon, on each meal.

Question from Napoleon B: "What tips do you have for sausage dog owners, especially keeping a healthy back as they're so long?"

Dr. Becker: I'm assuming the breed we're talking about here is a Dachshund, perhaps, or a Corgi, Bassett Hound, or similar. Dogs with long backs could really benefit from a third set of legs to support their midsection, couldn't they?! Hopefully we're not talking sausage = heavy body weight, because one of the best ways to keep dogs with a very long torso healthy is to keep them lean and fit.

When I see young dogs with long backs, I start them on a core building muscle enhancement program, because the stronger your dog's core is, the more resilient the back will be. Swimming is one of the very best exercises for dogs with this type of body.

Maintaining a good body weight doesn't automatically mean your dog has good muscle tone. Lean and well-muscled is most important. Daily aerobic exercise, walking uphill and downhill, and swimming if possible, is really important. It's also important to supply chondro protective agents, things like MSM and Perna mussel, glucosamine, chondroitin, and hyaluronic acid. I like to start chondro protective agents right away, like at three months of age, with long-backed breeds.

Question from Lucy: "Why do dogs eat dirt?"

Dr. Becker: Most of the time dogs will eat soil because they're craving minerals or something missing from their microbiome. When it comes to **grass eating**, some dogs just like the taste, but most are particular about the type of grass and/or dirt they want to ingest.

What's the quality of your dog food and how often are you rotating the proteins, especially? The first thing to analyze is whether your dog's diet provides all the minerals he or she needs, in the right amounts. Next, how's your dog's gut microbiome? Is it perhaps out of balance? At-home animal microbiome testing is becoming more affordable, and more common as well. If the diet you're feeding isn't the problem, it could be your dog is craving minerals from grass or dirt because he or she isn't digesting or absorbing the food due to a less-than-optimal gut microbiome.

Question from S.Q Brat III: "I have a seven-year-old Pembroke Welsh Corgi that has high liver enzymes. They're 300."

Dr. Becker: I'm going to assume that when you say high liver enzymes, you mean ALT, alanine transaminase. And your question is, "How high is too high? She appears to be super healthy otherwise." It's important to remember that there are internal and external causes for high liver enzymes in canines. ALT is a liver damage enzyme — it tells us there's damage going on, but it doesn't tell us why.

Now is the time to start a protocol. Then you can recheck the ALT and find out if it's better or worse or the same; 300 is definitely high. If your dog's liver enzymes were normal last year and they're high this year, what changed? Did you recently give flea and tick medication? I've seen those chemicals cause an elevation in ALT, along with heartworm prevention chemicals, lawn chemicals, fertilizers, and pesticides. Evaluate your home, water, and your pet's diet for potential causes.

Stop all commercial diets if possible, and prepare a homemade diet. Do a homemade detox diet that also includes milk thistle to help support liver detoxification. Do that for four weeks, evaluate and clean up your dog's living environment and then recheck that ALT. If it has improved, what you're doing is effective, and I would recheck in six months. If the ALT is still high or even higher, the next step is a liver function test, which is a pre and post bile acids test.

Question from Duncan the Scotty: "Do you have any recommendations on how long our pet should have milk thistle for a detox? Is it one week, two weeks? And how often should we repeat the process?"

Dr. Becker: That really depends on your pet's level of exposure to toxins. Some dogs are exposed all day, every day due to their living environment or lifestyle. If your dog is constantly walking on a pesticide sprayed grass, for example, I'd probably do daily detoxification. If you're giving a heartworm pill, which is a pesticide, every six weeks, I would do a detox for a week starting the day that you give the heartworm pill.

If you live in an all green organic house and your pet has no outside chemical exposures whatsoever, and you feed an entirely organic free range ethically sourced diet that you home prep, and you filter your water, your pet may not need any detox.

Question from Pippa Ventura: "What's your opinion on CBD oil every day for a two-year-old girl?"

Dr. Becker: My opinion really covers all supplements, including CBD. The question is, why are you giving it? Everyone should remember that no amount of supplements will undo a poor diet. You can't supplement your way out of bad food, and you can't supplement your way out of a behavior problem or an anxiety crisis. Supplements can't balance out the metabolic burden of terrible food.

I would rather my clients buy more expensive human grade real food diets that prevent the need for most supplements than to spend that money on supplements. However, many pets do need supplements. All of my animals are on supplements due to a genetic predisposition, age, or physical issues that I can't resolve through diet.

For more on the CBD question, see my response to Scarlett below.

Question from Scarlet: "What about resveratrol for dogs?"

Dr. Becker: Resveratrol is a very potent polyphenol antioxidant that is derived from the skin of grapes. We don't do grapes for pets, so we replace resveratrol with Japanese knotweed, which I use for pets with cancer, liver disease, and as an anti-aging strategy. However, I don't think every pet needs it.

The same is true for CBD, which can help with pain-related issues, for example. But if you're giving it to your pet every day, I would probably say no, don't do that because it's expensive, and there's probably no reason to. If there's a specific medical reason, either for improved quality of life or a health benefit to be derived from CBD, then do it. But if you don't know why you're using it or you haven't seen improvement, it might be wise to choose a different protocol that can give you the results you want for your pet, and for the money you're spending.

Well, I need to bring this Q&A session to a close. I got to a lot of questions, but not all of them, so we'll do this again in the future.

I appreciate each and every one of you who tuned in today, and all your wonderful questions. Hopefully, you gained some information that you can use immediately, or that you can tuck in your back pocket for use down the road. Thanks for joining me today, and we'll see you on bark & whiskers soon!
