

Popular Pet Dental Products Can Contain Tumor-Causing Agents

The FDA still permits the use of harmful chemicals in these pet products because they're used in low doses. But pets are often fed these day in and day out for months, years, or a lifetime and the chemicals can build up in their bodies. Three popular products and 6 ingredients to avoid.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dental care products for pets are growing in popularity with consumers concerned about their animal companion's oral health
- Best sellers in the pet oral care category include dental chews and treats
- Most affordable dental care chews and treats are non-nutritious and contain additives and potentially toxic synthetic preservatives
- Raw recreational bones can be an excellent alternative to processed dental care treats
- Brushing your dog's teeth regularly is also important, even if you also provide dental chews or raw bones

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 24, 2016.

According to a recent Packaged Facts report, U.S. sales of pet oral care products were expected to reach \$775 million in 2015.¹ A large chunk of that \$775 million will come from the sale of oral care dog biscuits and treats.

On one hand, it's great news that pet parents are becoming more aware of the need to focus on their animal companion's oral health. But the not-so-great news is that the quality of mass marketed oral care dog biscuits and treats leaves a lot to be desired.

For example, Greenies are still very popular despite the fact that safety concerns have relegated sales of these products to pet stores and veterinary offices only.

In 2014, Pedigree Dentastix was the top-selling oral care dog treat. Newer products such as Milk Bone Brushing Chews and Purina Beneful Healthy Smile Dental Twists have also been flying off store shelves.

Before You Buy Dental Care Treats, Read the Ingredient List!

All three of the products I just named are remarkable for their lack of species-appropriate nutrients, as well as the sheer number of synthetic additives and preservatives that appear on the ingredient list.²

The Milk Bone and Beneful treats even contain the synthetic toxic preservatives BHA (Milk Bone Brushing Chews)³ and BHA + BHT (Purina Beneful Healthy Smile Dental Twists).⁴

BHA (butylated hydroxyanisole) and BHT (butylated hydroxytoluene) are used to prevent fats and oils in food from turning rancid.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Toxicology Program has identified BHA and BHT as cancer-causing agents that consistently produce certain types of tumors in laboratory animals.⁵

Unfortunately, the FDA still permits use of these chemicals as preservatives in food, deeming them "generally recognized as safe" in low doses.

The problem is that pets are often fed the same processed food and treats day in and day out for months, years, or a lifetime. This can result in cumulative exposure to substances known to cause cancer.

I strongly encourage you to avoid pet food and treats containing BHA and BHT, as well as ethoxyquin, propylene glycol, TBHQ (tertiary butylhydroquinone), and propyl gallate.

Recreational Bones Are Better Than Processed Dental Treats

Since it can be very difficult to find store-bought dental care biscuits and treats that are nutritious, species-appropriate, and safe, have you considered offering your dog raw recreational bones?

Recreational bones are the big beef or bison femur or hipbones filled with marrow. They don't supply much nutrition (because they should be gnawed on only, not chewed up and swallowed), but they do provide great mental stimulation and oral health benefits.

When your dog chews on a raw recreational bone, especially a meaty one with cartilage and soft tissue still attached, his teeth get the equivalent of a good brushing and flossing. This helps to break down tartar and reduces the risk of gum disease.

Gnawing and repetitive grinding are the chewing actions that wear down plaque and tartar on teeth, which means big recreational bones or chews that are meant to be worked on by your dog over a period of time.

Smaller treats that are chewed and swallowed in a matter of seconds or minutes provide no real dental benefit for your pet.

There's a big difference between treats that your dog chews and swallows almost immediately, and big bones or chews that require effort and can help control plaque and tartar in your dog's mouth.

10 Rules for Offering Recreational Bones to Your Dog

Before you give a recreational bone to your dog to chew on, you should be aware of the following 10 important guidelines:

1. Dogs who are aggressive chewers can and frequently do chip or fracture their teeth on raw bones. Veterinary dentists have many clients who blindly offered raw bones to their dogs, and wound up with a bill for expensive dental work.

Edible bones are the hollow, non-weight-bearing bones of birds (typically chicken wings and chicken and turkey necks). They are soft, pliable, don't contain marrow, and can be easily crushed in a meat grinder.

Edible bones (whole or coarsely ground) are a good alternative to recreational raw bones for aggressive chewers.

2. Bone marrow is fatty; it can add lots of calories to your pet's daily caloric intake and should be avoided if your pet has pancreatitis.
3. Marrow can also cause diarrhea if consumed by dogs with sensitive stomachs. My recommendation is to scoop out the marrow until your pet's GI tract has adapted to the higher fat treat.

Another alternative is to offer bones with no marrow if your pet is battling a weight problem or needs a low fat diet. You can also replace marrow with fat free pumpkin and freeze.

4. Raw bones are usually sold frozen. When they thaw and your pet chews on them, they can be seriously messy. Many people offer bones outside, in crates, or on a surface that can be mopped afterwards.
5. When it comes to the right size bone for your dog, my advice is to match the bone size to your dog's head. There's really no such thing as a "too big" bone, but there are definitely bones that are too small for some dogs.

Bones that are too small can be choking hazards and can also cause significant oral trauma.

6. If your pet breaks off large pieces of raw bone, I recommend removing them before she has the opportunity to swallow them.
7. Never cook raw bones; cooked bones splinter and are dangerous.
8. Always supervise dogs when you've given them raw bones.
9. I recommend separating even the best of dog friends when offering raw bones.
10. Keep in mind that recreational bones don't supply adequate calcium for homemade meals that don't contain edible bones or bone meal.

Don't Forget to Brush Those Teeth!

Even if you offer dental chews or raw recreational bones, it's still important to brush your dog's teeth regularly to reduce the bacteria that build up on enamel. With patience and persistence, most pet owners can teach their dog to submit to daily tooth brushing, which is the ideal way to insure tartar doesn't form on the teeth.

One of the secrets to successful tooth brushing is to progress slowly and gently, allowing your dog to adapt at her own pace. Start with your finger rather than a toothbrush and get her familiar with having your finger in her mouth. Gently rub the top front teeth and all the way to the back teeth. Then do the same on the lower teeth.

Praise your dog often and keep these sessions short. Once your pet is accepting of the presence of your finger in her mouth, wrap a very thin damp cloth or piece of gauze around your fingertip and rub the teeth.

The next step is to use a safe, natural dental cleaning product designed for pets and apply a small amount to the gauze before you rub your dog's teeth. Once she gets used to this, you can progress to either a finger brush or a soft toothbrush the right size for her mouth.

If your furry companion is highly resistant to having her teeth rubbed or brushed, there are products available that when applied to the teeth go to work to break down plaque and tartar without brushing. However, the more rubbing and brushing your pet will allow, the more quickly you'll see results, and the easier it will be to maintain her oral health.

Sources and References

[Pet Product News December 2015](#)

¹ [Packaged Facts Press Release, November 10, 2015](#)

² [Pedigree Dentastix Original Treats - Ingredients](#)

³ [Milk Bone Brushing Chews Fresh Breath Daily Dental Treats](#)

⁴ [Purina Beneful Healthy Smile Dental Twists](#)

⁵ [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 13th Report on Carcinogens](#)
