

Dogs Love Bones, but Please Avoid This Mistake

This proved fatal to a 2-year-old miniature Schnauzer. But sadly, the whole tragedy could've been avoided had the owners paid attention to these 2 all-important rules for this highly engaging doggie activity. Instead, they evidently violated both of them.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Veterinarians are increasingly warning dog owners not to give recreational bones to their pets due to the danger they pose
- While it's true that for some dogs no bone is safe, most can be offered raw bones as long as the dog's guardian is knowledgeable and careful
- While cooked bones are a serious safety hazard, raw recreational bones can provide significant benefits to dogs
- Two very important rules for feeding raw bones to your dog include insuring you're offering the right size bone, and supervising your dog whenever he or she is working on a bone

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 20, 2017.

Recently I ran across an article in the U.K. Telegraph about the danger of feeding bones to dogs. According to Dr. Rebecca Ashman, a veterinarian with Britain's leading veterinary charity, the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA):

"We don't recommend bones as treats because unfortunately our vets and nurses regularly see dogs with digestive tract damage and blockages caused by splinters or larger pieces of bone being swallowed and becoming stuck."¹

Ashman also recommends, as I do, against rawhide chews for the same reason, along with the fact that they can contain harmful chemicals such as bleach, hydrogen peroxide and arsenic.

Knucklebone Proves Fatal to Two-Year-Old Miniature Schnauzer

The article tells the tragic story of a young Miniature Schnauzer named Burtie. Burtie's parents gave him a ham knucklebone as a Christmas treat. The dog quickly became ill and was rushed to a veterinary clinic, where x-rays showed bone fragments in his stomach and intestines.

Despite a four-hour surgery, little Burtie had to be euthanized on Christmas Day, which was also his second birthday. Needless to say, his owners were devastated.

Unfortunately, the article is annoyingly vague about whether the bone Burtie was given was raw or cooked, and what his history with chews and bones was. This statement by Burtie's owner makes me suspect it was cooked:

*"Burtie took it [the bone] away, as dogs do, and ate almost the whole thing. Of course you wouldn't think that a potentially lethal product can be packaged up as a dog treat and sold to unsuspecting pet owners."*²

I'm not sure a raw knucklebone would be packaged as a dog treat. She also said this:

"I don't think people are aware of the dangers involved in giving your dog a bone — particularly cured or cooked ones — and we are fully supportive of the PDSA advice."

I'm sad if Burtie was given a cooked bone. You'll know if bones have been cooked (cured) because they'll be sitting on shelves or in bins at room temperature. I'm also sad the little guy was allowed to hide away with his bone, and I'm sad his poor parents didn't realize the hazards of both until it was too late.

There's a safe way to offer recreational bones to most (but not all) dogs. In Burtie's case, it seems two important rules for feeding bones were broken. Number one, only offer raw bones. Number two, always supervise your dog while he's working on a bone — don't let him out of your sight.

Raw Versus Cooked Bones

It appears the British Veterinary Association (BVA) is aware raw bones are safer than cooked bones. The BVA's junior vice president, Gudrun Ravetz, was also interviewed for the Telegraph article:

"Cooked bones are dangerous to cats and dogs and vets routinely see animals who have consumed them, whether through being fed the cooked bones directly or from finding them whilst scavenging through bins.

In many cases the animals will require surgery to remove bone shards, splinters and blockages, but it can also prove fatal.

We ask owners to never feed their pets cooked bones, and to also dispose of any bones left over from their own meal safely and securely to avoid pets seeking them out again.

*If owners feed their dog raw bones we would recommend speaking to their veterinary surgeon to understand the risks and to only do so as part of a balanced diet. Handling raw meat and bones can also have risks for human health. We would not advise feeding cats raw bones."*³

Your dog's ancestors and counterparts in the wild have been eating bones forever. Canines in their natural habitat eat prey, including the meat, bones and intestinal contents. In fact, your pet has a biological requirement for the nutrients found in bone marrow and the bones themselves.

And dogs love to chew raw bones for the yummy taste, the mental stimulation and also because all that gnawing is great exercise for the muscles of the jaw. There are actually two types of raw bones: edible bones and recreational bones.

- **Edible raw bones** — These are the hollow, non weight-bearing bones of birds (typically chicken wings and chicken and turkey necks).

They are soft, pliable, do not contain marrow and can be easily crushed in a meat grinder. These bones provide calcium, phosphorus and trace minerals that can be an essential part of your dog's balanced, raw food diet.

- **Recreational raw bones** — These are big chunks of beef or bison femur or hipbones filled with marrow. You'll find raw recreational bones in the freezer section of your upscale pet boutique or local butcher.

They don't supply significant dietary nutrition for your dog and are for gnawing only, not eating.

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 break down tartar and reduces the risk of gum disease.

Dogs in the wild have beautiful teeth and healthy gums. This is because the prey they eat requires a lot of chewing, and the sinewy composition helps to clean each entire tooth.

Seven Rules for Offering Raw Recreational Bones to Your Dog

1. You should be able to find raw (not steamed, boiled or baked) knucklebones at your local butcher shop or the meat counter of your supermarket (sometimes they're called soup bones).

When you get the bones home, store them in the freezer and thaw them one at a time before offering them to your dog. Don't choose bones that have been cut lengthwise, such as leg bones.

Cut bones are more likely to splinter. And don't feed pork bones or rib bones, as they're more likely to splinter than other types of bones.

2. 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. Too-small bones can be choking hazards and can also cause significant oral trauma.

Don't give a recreational bone to a dog who's likely to try to swallow it whole or bite it in two and eat it in huge chunks. If your pet breaks off large pieces of raw bone, collect them before she has the opportunity to swallow them.

I also recommend giving your dog a bone to chew after she's full from a meal. Hungry dogs (or dogs rarely offered bones) are more likely to swallow a bone whole or break it apart and swallow large chunks. This increases the risk of an obstruction in the digestive tract.

3. It's important to be aware that aggressive chewers can and often do chip or fracture their teeth on raw bones, so don't give them to a dog who has had restorative dental work or crowns.

Veterinary dentists have many clients who offered raw bones to their aggressive chewers and wound up with a bill for expensive dental work. Edible bones (whole or coarsely ground) can be a good alternative to recreational raw bones for aggressive chewers. Choose non-weight bearing bones (e.g., wings, not legs).

If you have concerns about whether your dog will chew edible bones or swallow them whole, you can grip one end with pliers or a similar tool, forcing your pup to chew off bite sized pieces. Some people also use a mallet to fracture the bones prior to feeding, which minimizes the risk of swallowing them whole.

4. Always closely supervise your dog when he's working on a bone. Don't allow him to carry his prize off to a corner alone, without supervision.

You want to be able to react immediately if he starts to choke, if there's a large chunk suddenly missing from the bone or if you notice any blood on the bone or around your dog's mouth from over-aggressive gnawing. By closely supervising him, you'll also know when your dog has chewed down to the hard brittle part of a knucklebone, making splinters more likely.

Dogs who try to eat marrow bones in one sitting are often not good candidates for knucklebones because they can't discern the difference between an edible bone and a recreational bone. When the bone has been gnawed down in size, throw it out. Don't allow your dog to chew it down to a small chunk he can swallow.

5. In multi-dog households, to keep the peace dogs should be separated before being given recreational bones. This rule applies to casual canine friends and BFFs as well, because recreational bones can bring out resource guarding instincts in even the most easygoing dog.
6. Bone marrow is fatty and can add to your pet's daily caloric intake. Dogs with pancreatitis shouldn't eat bone marrow. Marrow can also cause diarrhea in dogs with sensitive stomachs, so I suggest scooping 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 dog is battling a weight problem or needs a low-fat diet. You can also replace the marrow with fat-free pumpkin and then refreeze the bones.

7. Raw bones can make quite a mess as your dog gnaws on them. That's why many people offer them outdoors or on a surface that can be easily cleaned with hot, soapy water.

Sources and References

[The Telegraph September 17, 2016](#)

^{1,2,3} [The Telegraph, September 17, 2016](#)
