

5 Raw Food Mistakes to Avoid With Your Dog

Switching to a species-appropriate raw food is beneficial for most dogs, but it's not always easy to do, and it's easy to make serious mistakes. This excellent mainstream article sums it up beautifully.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent article at a mainstream pet health site discussed mistakes dog parents often make when feeding a raw diet
- One mistake is not understanding your dog's basic nutritional requirements, which includes assuming a raw diet for pets involves only meat, or meat, bones and organs
- Other mistakes include overlooking the value of roughage, or low-glycemic produce in a fresh food diet, ignoring the need for appropriate dietary supplements, and being overly concerned with the safety of raw pet food

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Much to my delight, I recently ran across a really great article on raw pet diets at a mainstream pet health site. The point of the article is that while switching to raw food has tremendous benefits for most dogs, it's not always easy to do, and it's relatively easy to make mistakes. I couldn't agree more. The article, written by Diana Bocco for PetMD, discusses five mistakes dog parents often make when switching their pets to a raw diet.¹

Mistake No. 1: Misunderstanding Canine Nutrition Basics

Many (and I would say most) homemade and prey-model diets and even some commercially available raw diets are nutritionally unbalanced. This can cause dogs to become deficient in antioxidants, or the correct amounts of trace minerals and vitamins, or the right fatty acid balance for appropriate and balanced skeletal growth, and organ and immune health.

Just because nutritional deficiencies aren't obvious in your dog doesn't mean they don't exist. A considerable amount of research has gone into determining what nutrients dogs need to survive. At a minimum, we do a disservice to dogs by taking a casual approach to ensuring they receive all the nutrients they require for good health.

What's sad and somewhat interesting to me is the number of lay people arguing about basic nutrient requirements to just sustain a dog's existence. We have proven (through experiments I hope are never repeated) the bare bone nutrients needed to sustain life in a puppy and kitten. Nutritionists did this decades ago, which is how we came up with "minimum nutrient requirements," which means we've proven the minimums necessary to sustain life.

Research is clear on what happens when you deprive dogs of calcium, iodine, selenium, magnesium, copper, iron, manganese, vitamins D and E, potassium and a whole range of critical nutrients necessary for cell growth, repair and maintenance. There's no reason to run these experiments again from your own kitchen; it will cost you your dog's health.

There should be four primary components in a raw diet for dogs: meat, including organs; pureed vegetables and fruit; a homemade vitamin and mineral mix (in most cases); and beneficial additions like **probiotics**, digestive enzymes and super green foods (these aren't required to balance the diet, but can be beneficial for vitality).

A healthy dog's diet should contain about 75 to 85 percent meat/organs/bones and 15 to 25 percent veggies/fruits (this mimics the GI contents of prey, providing fiber and antioxidants as well). This "80/10/10" base is an excellent starting point for recipes, but is far from being balanced and is not appropriate to feed long term without addressing the significant micronutrient deficiencies present.

Fresh, whole food provides the majority of nutrients dogs need, and a micronutrient vitamin/mineral mix takes care of deficiencies that may exist, namely iron, copper, manganese, zinc, iodine, vitamins D and E, folic acid and taurine. If you opt not to use supplements, you must add in whole food sources of these nutrients, which requires additional money and creativity.

If you're preparing a homemade diet for your pet, I can't emphasize enough the importance of ensuring it's nutritionally balanced. Making your dog's food from scratch requires you to make sure you're meeting macro and micronutrient requirements. Do not guess. Follow nutritionally balanced recipes. The good news? Dr. Mercola/Healthy Pets is releasing a human-grade vitamin/mineral mix for homemade meals in a few months that will make balancing homemade meals a snap.

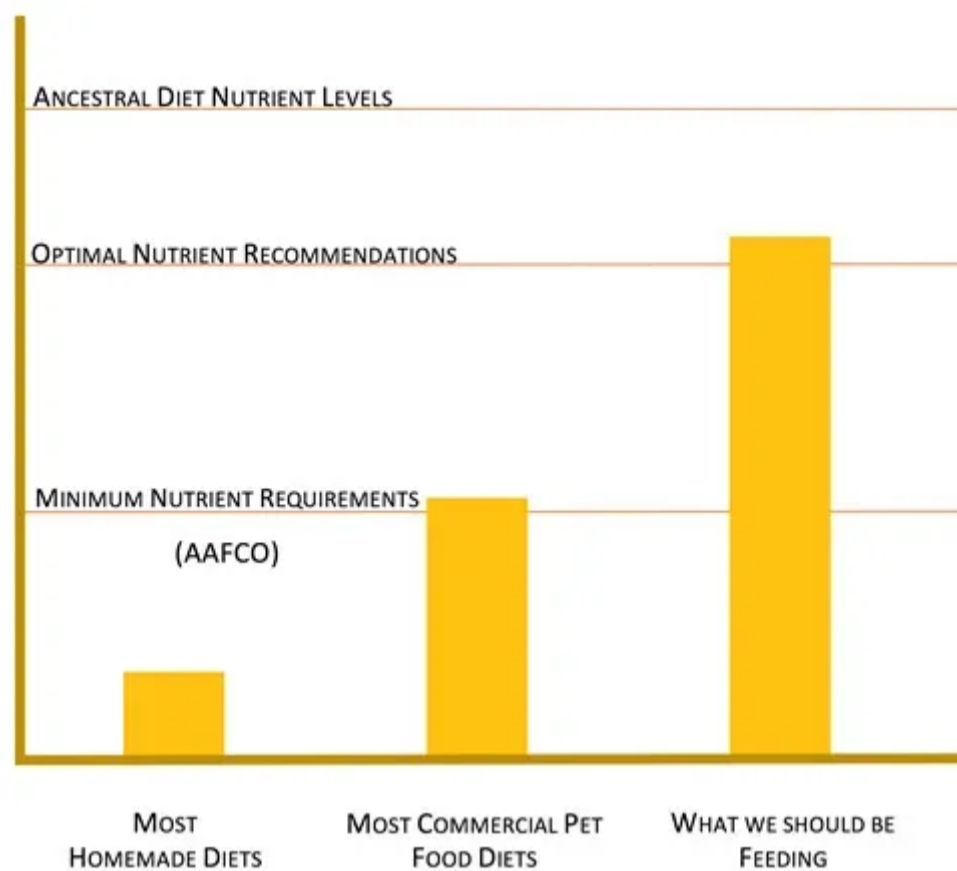
Mistake No. 2: Feeding Only Raw Meat

Many well-meaning pet guardians are confusing balanced, species-appropriate nutrition with feeding hunks of raw muscle meat to their dog. Although fresh meat is a good source of protein and some minerals, it doesn't represent a balanced diet. Feeding a basic "80/10/10" diet is also nutritionally unbalanced and will cause significant issues over time.

Wild canines eat nearly all the parts of their prey, including small bones, internal organs, blood, brain, glands, hair, skin, teeth, eyes, tongue and other tasty treats. Many of these parts of prey animals provide important nutrients, and in fact, this is how carnivores in the wild nutritionally balance their diets.

An exclusive diet of ground up chicken carcasses, for example, is lacking the minimum requirements for a number of vital nutrients in comparison to a nutritionally complete whole prey item, and falls grossly short of almost all nutrients to meet even AAFCO's minimum nutrient requirements (which isn't saying much).

These include potassium, iron, copper, manganese, zinc, iodine, selenium and vitamins A, D, E, B12 and choline. The vast majority of prey model diets fall into this category, which is why so many vets are opposed to them; they grossly undernourish animals, despite delivering sufficient calories, which is a recipe for disaster over time.



Some people are shocked to discover higher fat meats (such as ground beef at over 20 percent fat) will fail to meet a dog's basic amino acid requirements. You may also hear some people say **that feeding a meat-based diet can make your dog mean**. Research demonstrates that indeed, feeding a tryptophan (amino acid)-deficient diet (which is what happens when fatty, less expensive meats and carcasses are used as the mainstays in homemade diets) can result in behavior changes.

In addition, many homemade raw diet feeders create diets that are predominantly chicken-based, because chicken is cheap. Chicken meat must be balanced with omega 3-rich foods to control inflammation. Ground up whole chicken fryers have an omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acid ratio of 20:1! That's a lot of inflammation to feed to your dog! I recommend making sure foods don't cross the 5:1 ratio, and the goal would be to a 2:1 ratio.

Some conditions brought on by nutritional deficiencies can be corrected through diet, others cannot. And don't make the mistake of thinking all you need to do is throw a few fresh veggies in the bowl or a little bit of liver to make up the difference. Balancing your pet's food to provide optimal nutrition is a bit more complex.

Mistake No. 3: Forgetting Roughage

Maned wolves have been reported to consume up to 38 percent plant matter during certain times of the year. We know domesticated dogs voluntarily graze on grasses and plant matter for a variety of reasons, including meeting their body's requirements for enzymes, fiber, antioxidants and phytonutrients.

Providing adequate amounts of low-glycemic, fibrous vegetables also provides prebiotic fibers necessary to nourish your dog's microbiome and contributes to overall gut and colon health.

Some fruits, for example, blueberries, are rich sources of antioxidants, so it's important not to overlook them when planning your dog's nutritionally balanced raw diet. You can puree fruits, along with appropriate veggies, and add them into the raw mixture; you can also offer them whole in small pieces as treats or snacks as long as your dog has no problem digesting them. A good rule of thumb is to keep produce content less than 25 percent of the diet.

Mistake No. 4: Ignoring the Potential Need for Supplements

There are only two options for assuring nutritional adequacy in homemade diets: feeding a more expensive, whole food recipe that contains a significant number of diversified ingredients necessary to meet nutrient requirements, or using supplements. I'm not going to list the third and most common choice here (feed an unbalanced diet) because this shouldn't be an option, in my opinion.

After seeing countless people unintentionally harm their pets by guessing at recipes and telling me, "They look fine to me right now. I wish you'd quit harping about balance," only to call me three years later to say, "I realize now what you were talking about, and I'm so sad I didn't believe you." I cannot ever endorse feeding an unbalanced diet for longer than about three months (for adult animals), because I know the power of nutrition. Our soils are nutritionally depleted, therefore our foods are nutritionally deficient.

I know some people don't understand or care about supplying the "bare bones" minimum nutrients necessary to sustain life without negative biochemical changes, much less having a burning desire to provide the vast nutritional resources needed to amp up detoxification pathways necessary to upregulate biochemical pathways required to cope with the overwhelming number of chemicals we put into our pet's bodies (dozens of unnecessary vaccines, topical pesticide applications, toxic cleaning supplies and lawn chemicals, etc.), so they don't.

And the body becomes nutritionally depleted and can no longer do its job excellently. I believe if we take on the task of preparing homemade meals for our pets we have a responsibility to make sure the food provides the basic nutrients necessary for normal cellular repair and maintenance.

Most homemade diets lack the correct calcium and phosphorus balance as well as essential fatty acid balance. Adequate amounts of whole food sources of zinc, copper, iodine, manganese, selenium, vitamin E and D are also hard to come by using whole food sources.

Some "superfood" powders, such as microalgae and spirulina, can provide a very small (inadequate) amount of these critical nutrients to the body, but not enough to call them sufficient "whole food multi-vitamins." Not even a pound of spirulina added to a pound of fresh meat provides enough trace minerals for dogs.

Likewise, there's not enough copper in chicken livers to meet a dog's copper requirements without throwing off the balance of other nutrients. So when I hear someone say, "I've added chicken livers to meet trace mineral requirements" I know they haven't seen the numbers to realize how deficient the diet will be if they do this.

When evaluating a recipe for nutritional adequacy, a good place to start is with these hard-to-come-by nutrients. Are there nuts or seeds added as a whole food source of vitamin E and selenium? Is kelp added as a source of iodine, and if not, is there a supplement added to meet iodine requirements?

Adequate levels of zinc are found in oysters, but not a lot of other foods at the levels required to adequately support a dog's body, hence the addition of a zinc supplement to healthy recipes. Adequate vitamin D is found in sardines and some pasture-raised livers (but not factory farmed livers).

If the recipe lacks richly colored vegetables, then there should be an alternative source of manganese and potassium included in the recipe as well (unless you want to feed red rodent hair, which is a rich source of manganese in the wild). **Here's an easy recipe I created that shows where the nutrients come from to make the meal nutritionally balanced.** And **here's a raw, balanced, chicken recipe.** The more variety you feed, the better.

The problem is that most raw feeders get stuck feeding the same blends of meat, bone and organ over and over, which is where the bulk of problems come in and why most vets discourage fresh food in the first place.

If you don't see ample amounts of a variety of whole foods listed in the recipes (or amounts of these supplements to add) then the diet is probably nutritionally inadequate. Feeding an unbalanced meal now and then is fine. Feeding unbalanced meals day after day is what causes problems over time.

And because "nutrition (deficiency) is never a crisis," as Dr. Richard Patton says, many well-meaning pet lovers end up unintentionally creating degenerative issues that could be avoided through feeding a balanced diet. Recipes provided by nutritionists or knowledgeable fresh food advocates provide a nutritional breakdown that shows you the amounts of nutrients found in the recipes.

Two months ago, I saw a Wheaton Terrier who had been on an unbalanced raw diet for a year. Six months ago, she visited the dermatologist for a non-healing crack on her footpad that was creating discomfort for her.

After spending hundreds of dollars on biopsies, drugs, creams and bandage changes, the owner visited me for a third opinion. We discussed the micronutrients missing from the dog's diet needed for normal cell repair and healing and added them in. Two weeks later the dog was able to be liberated from her e-collar for the first time in months because her foot pad was finally healing.

Some dogs benefit from additional supplements to support specific organ systems, such as joint support for seniors. The supplements that may be best for your dog depend on a variety of factors, including breed and disease susceptibility, age, weight, activity level, sterilization status, chronic health conditions and more. It's important to work with your veterinarian to determine what supplements, in addition to those added to the food to balance the diet, your dog may need, how much to give and how often.

Mistake No. 5: Letting Safety Concerns Scare You

There are a number of organizations, including conventional veterinary groups, government agencies and of course the processed pet food industry, that have taken a public stand against raw pet food diets. Sadly, the fear mongering has had an effect. If you're worried about raw food pathogens, it's important to note that there's a whole class of raw pet foods currently available that are sterile at the time of purchase.

Just as a significant percentage of the human meat supply has been treated with a sterilization technique called high-pressure pasteurization (HPP), many raw commercially available pet foods have also opted for this sterilization technique to reduce potential pathogens.

As for "non-sterile" raw diets, the meat used in commercially available raw food is USDA-inspected and no different from the steak and chicken purchased for human consumption from a grocery store. It should be handled with the same safety precautions you use when you prepare, say, burgers for your family.

It's all the same meat. Your counters, bowls, cutting surfaces and utensils should be disinfected whether the raw meat is intended for your pet or human family members. Most adults understand that handling raw meat carries the potential for contact with pathogens, which is why appropriate sanitary measures are important whether you're handling your pet's raw food or your own.

Despite the inherent risks associated with handling raw meat, pet parents have been feeding raw diets to their dogs for decades, and to date, to my knowledge not one documented case of raw pet food causing illness in humans has been reported.

If you're already successfully feeding your pet a balanced raw diet, I hope you'll disregard misguided warnings and continue to offer your dog or cat real, fresh, living foods. If you're feeding an unbalanced diet, please take the time to source nutritionally complete recipes and follow them to assure you're feeding your pet everything they need. Or switch to a commercial raw diet that's done the balancing for you.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

¹ [PetMD](#)
