

## 22 Top Treat Choices That Don't Come From a Box

Giving your dog too many processed treats isn't unlike giving a human an endless supply of potato chips and candy. I believe the best treats are those that provide valuable nutrition to your pet while also serving as a special treat. How many of these healthy, fresh food choices have you tried?

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The best treats for dogs are human-grade whole foods, like bite-sized portions of meat, fresh fruits and vegetables
- Generally speaking, the part of the fruit or vegetable that you would eat is the part that you can safely feed to your pet as a treat
- Apples, avocado, mangos, blueberries, raspberries and peas are just several examples of healthy treats for dogs
- Always remove the rind, pit, core, stem and seeds, and cut foods into bite-sized pieces to avoid a choking risk before feeding them to your pet
- Treats should make up no more than 10% of your dog's daily food intake — any more than that and you run the risk of overfeeding or unintentionally depriving your dog of other nutrients his body needs

Most dogs enjoy a treat now and then, just like their owners. This is a perfect opportunity to add more nutrient-dense, fresh food into your pet's diet. But it's important not to overdo it.

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You'll also want to steer clear of "junk food" treats — think bacon-flavored "sausages" and bone-shaped cookies. Most commercially available dog treats are not only too big, portion-wise, but they also provide too many calories from carbs and often contain preservatives, artificial colors and flavors and other harmful additives.

A better choice is to focus on real food, in small, bite-sized portions, to give your dog a flavorful treat he'll enjoy that will also boost his health and wellness.

### Top Healthy Treat Options for Dogs

The best treats for dogs are human-grade whole foods, like bite-sized portions of meat, cheese or fresh fruits and vegetables. The only human foods that should not be offered to pets are members of the onion family, grapes/raisins, chocolate and nutmeg because they contain substances that pose a health risk to dogs and cats. Macadamia nuts should also be avoided because of their high fat content.

All other fruits and vegetables that are safe for humans to consume are also safe for pets, in moderation, recognizing some foods have significantly higher nutritional value than others. Be sure to watch out for pits, rinds, seeds, cores, leaves and stems, which can be a choking hazard.

Generally speaking, the part of the fruit or vegetable that you would eat is the part that you can safely feed to your pet as a treat. After removing the rind, pit, core, stem and seeds, cut foods into bite-sized pieces to avoid a choking risk before feeding them to your pet (similar to preparing fresh food for toddlers).

Some healthy raw dog treats you can offer to your pooch include raw almonds and cashews (for bigger dogs) and raw sunflower or pumpkin seeds (for smaller dogs). Organic fruits and vegetables also make great options, including the following. Choose organic, spray-free options when possible:

- Apples
- Avocado
- Bananas
- Blueberries
- Broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- Cantaloupe
- Carrots
- Celery
- Cucumbers
- Green beans
- Mango
- Mushrooms
- Oranges
- Peaches
- Pears
- Peas
- Pineapple
- Raspberries
- Strawberries
- Asparagus
- Watermelon

## **Sweet Potatoes Make Good Treats, but Avoid Store-Bought**

As an example of why it's so important to focus on fresh, homemade treats, sweet potatoes make an excellent treat for dogs. Steamed sweet potatoes are rich in beta-carotene and antioxidants and are also high in vitamin C. Sweet potatoes with purple flesh also have potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties that may lower the risk from

heavy metals and oxygen radicals.

However, store-bought sweet potato dog treats, particularly those from China, have been implicated in thousands of reports of illness and deaths in pets.<sup>1</sup> I also don't recommend store-bought jerky treats, due to similar ongoing problems with contamination.

Fortunately, these are easy to make at home, just place long thin strips of chicken breast, ideally organic and pastured, on a greased or nonstick cookie sheet and bake them for at least three hours at 180 degrees F.

The reality is, however, that not only do most dog owners (96%) report feeding treats to their dog,<sup>2</sup> but 69% fed store-bought treats on a daily basis. If you're looking to go the store-bought route, look for treats that are sourced and made in the U.S. Stating "made in the USA" on the label isn't enough, as this claim can be made even if the treats were only assembled in the U.S.

Instead, seek trusted companies that source their ingredients in the U.S. I've also found some high-quality treats made in New Zealand and Canada, but recommend avoiding those sourced from China. As for ingredients, look for human-grade items and avoid treats made with animal byproducts, added sugar, honey or molasses, grains, synthetic preservatives and artificial flavors and colors.

If you are interested in buying pre-made, commercially available human grade treats that have been third-party verified, check out **[The Treat List](#)**, put together by the Truth About Petfood, which I trust as a source for choosing my own pet food and treats.

## How Many Treats a Day Are OK?

There's no one-size-fits-all "number" of treats that each dog should be given. The number of treats that's right for your dog depends on his age, size, activity level and health status, as well as the type and size of the treat.

As a general rule, follow the "paw principle" when it comes to introducing your pup to fresh food treats: the size of a paw (width and length) is the portion you can divide up feed throughout the day. As your pup's GI tract adjusts to fresh food treats, you can expand the amount you offer, recognizing any additions (including fresh food goodies) should constitute less than 10% of overall calories in a day.

Whatever you do, don't follow the guidelines on the treat bag, which are notorious for overestimating how many treats your dog should eat. One study of 32 popular dog treats found that when the labels' recommended feeding instructions were followed in terms of number of treats per day, it led to dogs consuming 16% of their daily food intake in the form of treats instead of the recommended 10%.<sup>3</sup>

If you're reserving a few treats for before bedtime, a midday treat, as training rewards or to entice your dog into his crate or to go potty, his treat intake is probably OK (provided you're not overdoing it at each of these occasions). Treat portion size is also important; think pea-sized treats, especially if you're using lots of rewards for training purposes.

## Simple Recipes for Tasty, Healthy Homemade Dog Treats

My free e-cookbook, "Homemade Treats for Healthy Pets: Nutritious Recipes for Your Cats and Dogs," is filled with homemade dog and cat treat ideas, which are personally formulated by me and my mom. The recipes include only high-quality, organic (if you choose), non-GMO human-grade ingredients and will please even the most finicky of pups.

For a simple option that's especially refreshing during the summer months, try the recipe in the video above for frozen coconut oil and berry treats. First, bring coconut oil to a liquid consistency. Grab an ice cube tray and add organic berries, such as blueberries, raspberries and blackberries — one or two per cube.

Pour coconut oil in to fill up the tray, then place it in the freezer. Once frozen, pop out the cubes and offer to your pet. If the cubes are too large to safely feed to your pet whole, break them into smaller pieces before feeding. It's OK to experiment with new treats for your dog, too. You may find a new healthy food, like cantaloupe or cucumbers, that he enjoys noshing on occasionally!

If you're wondering exactly what additional fresh fruits and veggies are healthy to offer your pets as go-to fresh food training treats, we also have a vast learning resource page covering all the benefits of sharing fresh foods with your pets (as well as what foods to avoid) [\*\*here\*\*](#).

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [U.S. FDA, FDA Investigates Animal Illnesses Linked to Jerky Pet Treats](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Prev Vet Med. 2016 Sep 15;132:14-19](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Veterinary Record December 20, 2017](#)

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