

# The Dangerous Feeding Practice I Can't Condone

This practice is growing in popularity and I can't understand why. Dogs' and cats' bodies weren't created to survive this way, and depriving them of this basic need could cripple their healing potential and ability to function optimally.

**Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)**

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Both big pet food and vegetarian/vegan pet parents continue their campaign to push misguided, potentially dangerous dietary choices onto dogs in the form of plant-based diets
- They're currently championing a recent study that suggests a small group of dogs remained healthy for a year while eating a plant-based kibble
- As a vegetarian veterinarian, I'm firmly opposed to forcing one's personal dietary beliefs on other species; while I applaud human omnivores who choose to be vegetarians/vegans, I draw the line at insisting canine carnivores should adopt the same diet
- Because a dog is able to survive for a year eating a plant-based diet doesn't mean he's thriving; for better or worse, dogs are a species able to endure considerable "nutritional abuse" before their bodies begin to show the effects
- Bottom line: If your personal eating habits or philosophy require that even your pet abide by them, I encourage you to pick a species to care for whose dietary needs are aligned with yours

The ultraprocessed pet food industry, along with many well-meaning dog parents, continue their campaign to convince themselves and all of us that dogs should eat vegetarian or vegan diets. One recent example is an article in PetfoodIndustry.com headlined "Dogs healthy after one year of plant-based diets," announcing the results of a study conducted by researchers at the Western University of Health Sciences, in Pomona, CA.<sup>1</sup> The study authors write:

*"In this study, we confirm that clinically healthy adult dogs maintain health when fed a nutritionally complete, commercially available, plant-based diet with pea protein as a main ingredient over a twelve-month period. To our knowledge, this is the longest and most comprehensive study of K9PBN [canine plant-based nutrition] to date.*

*Assessment of body condition scores, blood work, and urinalysis as well as client-reported histories confirmed that all dogs maintained physical health during the one year feeding trial. Analyses of nutritional markers in blood confirmed that levels of essential AAs, L-aurine and L-carnitine as well as lipid- and water-soluble vitamins are maintained within normal reference intervals when feeding complete K9PBN."<sup>2</sup>*

## Why Are Some Dog Parents Following Big Pet Food Off a Cliff?

It's safe to assume big pet food promotes the idea of plant-based vs. meat-based products primarily because plant-based formulas improve their bottom line. And we know it's vegetarian/vegan pet parents who are most interested in meat-free diets for their dogs.

It's important to note that I'm a vegetarian, so I certainly understand and appreciate the decision many people make to adopt a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. However, what I will never understand is why many vegans and vegetarians think it's okay to force their personal viewpoints — their personal dietary choices — onto other species.

Humans are omnivores, meaning our bodies can digest both plant material and animal tissue. Dogs are scavenging carnivores, which means they are primarily meat-eaters and aren't designed to digest plant material efficiently. Nature designed the bodies of carnivores to thrive on nutrients provided by animal flesh and organ meat. As scavenging carnivores, dogs can survive on plant material, but they can't thrive on it alone. To thrive means to grow vigorously — to flourish.

Meat eaters must consume meat to unlock the body's healing potential, and to provide all the raw materials the body needs to function optimally. Carnivores, including dogs, fed a diet of plant material will not live a long, healthy life, and will have medical and degenerative conditions along the way.

When a carnivore is fed a vegetarian diet, or an herbivore like a rabbit is fed a meat-based diet, health problems are the inevitable result. Some species are better able to eat biologically inappropriate diets than others (I call this nutritional abuse). However, a very delicate creature like a hummingbird, for example, if forced to eat anything other than its evolutionary diet of nectar, will be dead within a few days.

Dogs, on the other hand, are quite resilient. Like the dogs in the above study fed a plants-only diet for a year, they can suffer a great deal of nutritional abuse and survive; however, their bodies will degenerate over time. Just because they can withstand nutritional abuse for "X" amount of time doesn't make it okay to feed diets that are inappropriate for their species.

## Big Pet Food's Case for Feeding Dogs Plant-Based Diets

Emma Bermingham, Ph.D., a senior research scientist at AgResearch in New Zealand, describes dogs as "... omnivorous carnivores [that] can eat a wide range of foods to survive."

*"Their ancestors hunted in packs and were competitive feeders after a kill, so they have little control over the amount of food they eat. Dogs are opportunistic scavengers.*

*Genetically, dogs have cognitive and brain function differences from wolves and other wild dogs. There is also genomic signature in domestic dogs that suggests mutation in starch digesting enzymes, allowing dogs to better digest carbohydrates than their wild ancestors."*<sup>3</sup>

This mutation in starch digesting enzymes in domesticated dogs is based on a 2013 study the big pet food companies love to refer to. For more information, watch my **[interview with veterinarian and author Dr. Doug Knueven](#)**, who explains why the study's assumptions and conclusions are based on incomplete data and are generally flawed.

Yes, dogs and humans coevolved,<sup>4</sup> with both species expressing epigenetic changes in response to agricultural practices (including the upregulation of amylase production), but this is hardly justification for feeding canines a vegetarian or plant-based diet. And dogs can consume a wide variety of foods to survive, but surviving is very different than thriving with an extended lifespan. Optimal nutrition is very different than meeting minimal nutrient requirements (as set forth by the pet food industry).

In my opinion, the industry has intentionally shifted the perception of dogs as carnivores to dogs as omnivores and now vegans, to recycle inappropriate agricultural waste (including peanut hulls, feather meal, and many other sources of “fiber” that would otherwise be discarded) into profitable pet food.

Just because dogs fed plant-based diets are able to stay alive doesn't make them omnivores. Taxonomically, dogs are in the Order Carnivora and the family Canidae. They, like other carnivores, cannot make vitamin D from sunlight, they must consume it in their prey.

They also cannot convert plant-based omega-3 fatty acids to DHA and EPA, they must consume these important long-chain essential fats in the foods they eat. Dogs are not wolves, but they certainly are not vegetarians, either. Healthy meat must be the foundation of their diet for long-term wellbeing.

The metabolic and physiologic consequences of feeding heat-processed, highly refined, high-starch diets to animals who require neither, include increased risks for all the major diseases affecting pets today. Government agencies are begging people to consume less highly refined foods, so why is the pet food industry insisting it's the healthiest choice for our furry family members? Can't vegan pet parents see that swapping vegan “fast food” for their pets isn't any healthier?

## **Dog Food Used in Study Contains FIFTY-SEVEN (57) Ingredients**

The meatless dog food used in the Western University of Health Sciences study was v-Dog Kind Kibble. The incredibly long ingredient list of this dry formula is your first hint as to the manipulation required to produce a biologically inappropriate but nutritionally complete plant-based diet for a carnivorous animal.

- Dried Peas
- Marine Microalgae
- Copper Sulfate
- Pea Protein
- Potassium Chloride
- Sodium Selenite
- Brown Rice
- Dried Chicory Root Inulin
- Manganese Sulfate
- Oatmeal
- Choline Chloride
- Calcium Iodate

- Potato Protein
- Taurine
- DL-Methionine
- Sorghum
- Vitamin E Supplement
- Dried Parsley
- Canola Oil
- Vitamin A Supplement
- L-Ascorbyl-2-Polyphosphate
- Natural Flavor
- Niacin Supplement
- Preserved with Citric Acid
- Suncured Alfalfa Meal
- d-Calcium Pantothenate
- Preserved with Mixed Tocopherols
- Brewers Dried Yeast
- Riboflavin Supplement
- Dried Celery
- Dicalcium Phosphate
- Vitamin D2 Supplement
- Dried Blueberries
- Flaxseeds
- Thiamine Mononitrate
- Dried Cranberries
- Millet
- Vitamin B12 Supplement
- Dried Beets
- Calcium Carbonate
- Pyridoxine Hydrochloride
- Yucca Schidigera Extract
- Lentils
- Biotin
- Dried Lettuce
- Peanut Hearts
- Folic Acid
- L-Carnitine

- Quinoa
- Dried Carrots
- Dried Watercress
- Sunflower Chips
- Ferrous Sulfate
- Dried Spinach
- Salt
- Zinc Sulfate
- Rosemary Extract

To demonstrate the difference between the biologically inappropriate kibble above and a biologically appropriate meat-based dog food, here's the 8 item ingredient list for Green JuJu Bison Recipe freeze dried diet for dogs:

- Bison heart
- Bison liver
- Bison kidney
- Bison bone
- Organic dandelion greens
- Organic kelp
- Vitamin E supplement

If you're into healthy eating, especially if you're a vegetarian or vegan, chances are you're looking for the freshest, simplest, least processed foods you can find when you grocery shop. It's obvious from the first list above that in order to "convert" your dog from meat-eater to plant-eater, you'll need to purchase a highly refined, high-heat processed, "anti-nature" dog food with literally dozens of synthetic nutrients needed to artificially create nutrition adequacy.

Equally concerning is the poor quality, feed-grade ingredients used in the vast majority of pet foods, including all vegan diets. Ingredients that fail human food chain inspection become ingredients in pet food, so the levels of glyphosate, mycotoxins and mold in vegan pet food products is a long-term health concern, as well.

## **Don't Allow Your Personal Beliefs to Eclipse Your Dog's Biology**

Passionate vegetarian and vegan dog parents often want their carnivorous companion animals to become vegan or vegetarian. I get emails from people who hear I'm a vegetarian veterinarian and believe I'll be supportive of their desire to transition their dog or cat away from a meat-based diet. They are sad to learn I don't encourage this.

Many veterinarians, including me, have clients who say, "I've been feeding my dog as a vegan for two years and she appears to be doing great." A few years down the road, we're treating these unfortunate animals for preventable degenerative diseases, including Type 2 diabetes from too many carbohydrates, **heart failure** from lack of amino acids, systemic inflammation from excessive omega 6 fatty acids and a lack of DHA and EPA, and serious musculoskeletal problems from trace mineral nutritional deficiencies.

Pet owners who force their carnivorous companion animals to eat meat-free diets are placing their personal beliefs in a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle ahead of their pet's physiologic need for a meat-based diet.

My vegan friend, Megan, doesn't like it when I use the term "force" to describe what pet guardians do when they choose to feed a dog or cat a non-meat-based diet. So, I suggested she offer her dog two options — a fresh, species-appropriate, ethically raised meat-based diet, and a fresh vegan-based diet, and then watch which one the dog eats.

Needless to say, the dog picked the meat-based meal, which perfectly proves the point that to feed a carnivore a diet he wouldn't choose for himself is indeed forcing him to survive on a diet his body was not designed to process or thrive on.

In conclusion, this is really just about using common sense and keeping the best interests of your pet as your number one priority. If your personal eating habits or philosophy are so strong that everyone in your family must abide by them, I encourage you to pick a species to care for whose God-given dietary needs are aligned with yours. If you're a committed vegetarian or vegan and can't stand the sight or even the thought of meat, choose a companion animal designed by nature as a vegetarian.

If your pet happens to be a rabbit and you're all about the Paleo lifestyle, please don't force your carnivorous habits onto your bunny. If your pet is a snake, don't be angry when he turns down salad. You get the idea. Pushing your personal nutritional philosophy on another species that doesn't have the same biologic requirements as you do isn't ethical.

## The Biologically Appropriate Diet I Recommend

The goal should be to mimic your pet's ancestral diet as closely as possible. I recommend feeding a nutritionally balanced, species-specific diet, which means food containing high-quality animal protein, moisture, healthy fats, and fiber, with low to no starch content.

A nutritionally balanced raw or gently cooked homemade diet is my **top choice for dogs**, but you should only attempt this if you're committed to doing it right. If you don't want to deal with balancing diets at home, a great alternative is to feed a pre-balanced, commercially available raw food (pasteurized to be bacteria-free, if you prefer).

A freeze-dried/dehydrated low-carb diet is second best. Human-grade canned food is a mid-range choice but can be hard to find. Rotate brands and protein sources frequently to nourish the microbiome.

And be sure to incorporate a variety of **fresh foods** into your pet's diet, too. Foods from your refrigerator supply critical polyphenols, enzymes, cofactors, and flavonoids found only in raw, unprocessed, unadulterated foods, so use fresh produce as meal toppers or treats throughout the day.

### Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [PetfoodIndustry.com, March 8, 2023](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Linde, A. et al. bioRxiv Preprint Server, February 21, 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup> [PetfoodIndustry.com, April 5, 2017](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Nature Communications 4, Article number: 1860 \(2013\)](#)