

Add These Healthy Foods to Your Pet's Bowl

Uncover the remarkable power of these foods in battling common pet ailments and enhancing overall well-being. From powerful antioxidants to heart health heroes, find out which foods offer a protective shield for your beloved pets and how to safely introduce them into their diet.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Ultraprocessed pet food manufacturers add safe fruits to their ingredient mixes, but there's likely not much nutrition remaining in these add-ins once the food has been high heat processed and extruded
- A much better way to offer your dog or cat healthy, pet-safe fruits like apples, avocados, and berries is to serve them fresh, as treats or toppers on nutritionally optimal, species-specific meals
- Remember that treats, including all fresh foods you share, should constitute less than 10% of your pet's daily caloric intake

According to a recent article in the journal *PetfoodIndustry.com*, "Fruit is widely considered a cornerstone of healthy eating for people, and fruits can also be nutritious parts of pet diets."¹ I absolutely agree, but with the stipulation that the nutritional value of all ingredients in ultraprocessed pet food, including fruits, is compromised during the manufacturing process.

The article discusses apples, avocados, and berries. Since the nutritional value of any food is diminished when high heat and extrusion are applied, let's take a closer look at the benefits of each of these fruits when offered fresh to dogs and cats, which is my recommendation. Unfortunately, highly refined fruit and vegetable powders can be added to pet food and listed as whole foods on the ingredient label, so skipping the marketing hype and using real foods as treats makes the most sense.

Apples

Fresh, organic (or spray-free) apples can be given to your pets as a crunchy snack or treat, or they can be added to their nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet. Cats are true carnivores, and most won't eat apples, but if yours shows an interest, it's fine to share a bite of apple with them too. Just remember that treats, including all fresh foods you share, should constitute less than 10% of your pet's daily caloric intake.

Apples are a rich source of antioxidants, and they offer a variety of phytochemicals, such as catechins, quercetin, phlorizin and chlorogenic acid. Studies show the strong antioxidant activities of apples may help minimize the risk of cancer and reduce lipid oxidation.²

One of the standout antioxidants in apples is quercetin, which is associated with a reduced risk of Type 2 diabetes and heart disease in human studies.³ Quercetin also has natural antihistamine properties, meaning it may help minimize allergy symptoms like itching, inflammation, and irritation in your pets.

One concern that pet parents have about apples is the myth that it can lead to cyanide poisoning. This is because apple seeds contain amygdalin, which is part of the plant's defense system. While this compound is harmless if the seeds remain intact, it can degrade into cyanide when the seeds are chewed or damaged.

However, the cyanide in apple seeds is found in miniscule quantities, so if your pet only consumes a few seeds, there's nothing to worry about. The safest thing to do is to remove the core, seeds, and stem from the apple before giving it to your furry family member. Feed the flesh only, and make sure you wash the fruit thoroughly before serving it.

As much as possible, you should keep the apple peel on, because it contains a good amount of flavonoids and fiber. This is why it's important you buy only organic apples for yourself and your pet. Fresh, organic, or unsprayed apples are often available at your local farmer's market.

Keep in mind that conventionally grown apples are typically treated with pesticides to protect them from insects and fungi. In fact, apples ranked seventh in the Environmental Working Group's 2023 Dirty Dozen list.⁴ By choosing organic apples, you can avoid overloading your pet's body with unwanted pesticides and chemicals that may do them harm.

Avocados

Avocados are beneficial for pets, and you shouldn't worry about claims that they are **poisonous** to dogs and cats (more about this shortly). What's more, the majority of avocados sold in the supermarket are free from pesticides, according to a report from the Environmental Working Group (EWG). In fact, avocados are at the top of EWG's "Clean Fifteen" list for 2023.⁵ However, it's still better to purchase organic avocados from certified producers whenever possible. This will help lower your and your pet's exposure to agricultural chemicals.

Avocados contain plenty of **healthy fats**, with 2.75 grams in every two-tablespoon serving.⁶ One of the most notable benefits of this fruit is its ability to boost the bioavailability of fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E and K) found in other foods.^{7,8} Avocados may also benefit your pet's gut bacteria.⁹

Avocados contain antioxidants, particularly lutein and zeaxanthin, which are crucial for optimal eyesight.¹⁰ They are also rich in carotenoids,¹¹ which are pigments that contribute to a plant's color.¹⁶ If you want to make the most of the carotenoids in your avocado, the dark green flesh closest to the peel contains the highest amounts — just make sure you do not mix any pieces of the peel itself when you share it with your pet.¹²

As noted earlier, avocados have a reputation for being poisonous to dogs. Misinformation about many healthy fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds abounds on the internet. This is because websites have labeled all risks (such as the risk of over-consumption causing gastrointestinal issues or the risk of choking on too-large pieces or pits) as "toxicities," which has managed to confuse millions of pet lovers.

Avocados can safely be served to dogs as treats or as an addition to a nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet. A 2012 study finally debunked the idea that they are bad, after showing that Beagles fed avocado extract did not have any adverse health effects.¹³

These days, many pet parents feed small amounts of avocado fruit to their dogs and cats. In excessive amounts, the natural fats may upset your pet's stomach, so offering only tiny pieces is recommended. Most cats, being carnivores, will not choose to eat this fruit.

Take care to remove the skin and the pit, as they contain high amounts of persin. The quality of the avocado is also important. Try purchasing organic avocados from certified producers whenever possible. While avocados belong to EWG's Clean Fifteen list, organically grown varieties can help lower your pet's exposure to chemicals compared to conventionally grown fruits, even if they're "clean."

Exercise caution with the stems, leaves, and pits, which contain the highest levels of persin. If you have avocado plants growing in your garden, make sure your pets do not ingest the stems, leaves, or the tree bark (though this is very unlikely to happen).

Sharing a bite of fresh avocado is completely safe, and using a small amount of mashed avocado on a lick mat or in a Kong or interactive toy is a great way to deliver raw, unadulterated fats that deliver great health benefits.

Blueberries and Cranberries

Blueberries are available all year and make great training treats for dogs. These delicious little fruits are loaded with phytochemicals and antioxidants and are also a good source of fiber, manganese and vitamins C and E. A good rule of thumb is two to four blueberries for every 10 pounds of dog a day. Replacing one of the processed treats you feed each day with fresh or frozen blueberries is a great way to increase antioxidants in your pet's diet.

Blueberries contain antioxidant phenolics that help counteract free radicals. This is important, since free radicals can lead to oxidative damage that plays a role in cancer, Alzheimer's disease, heart disease and other chronic conditions. Even in sled dogs, who engage in a great deal of exercise that can cause oxidative stress, supplementing with blueberries led to significantly elevated antioxidant status post-exercise.¹⁴

It's also interesting to note that wolves eat blueberries in the wild — a lot of them. In a collaboration between Voyageurs National Park and the University of Minnesota, researchers found that blueberries account for up to 83% of wolves' diets in July, among wolves living in Minnesota's boreal forests.¹⁵

Further, in a study involving dogs exposed to 33 different odors, blueberries were one of the scents that dogs chose to interact with the most (blackberry, mint, rose, lavender, and the terpene linalool were other favorites).¹⁶

In another example, a polyphenol-rich extract from grape and blueberry led to significant cognitive improvements in dogs, suggesting it could benefit working memory.¹⁷ "This effect could be probably explained by the induction of expression of several genes associated with lower susceptibilities to oxidative stress," the researchers explained. While this study used grape and blueberry extract successfully, it's important to feed only blueberries to your dog — never grapes, which can be toxic for pets.

In addition to phytochemicals and antioxidants, blueberries are also a good source of fiber, manganese, potassium, magnesium, and vitamins A, C, E and K. Replacing one of the processed treats you feed to your pet each day with fresh or frozen blueberries is a simple way to increase antioxidants in your pet's diet.

When it comes to cranberries, some studies indicate they may be beneficial for pets as well. It has been known for decades that this fruit can help lower the risk of **urinary tract infections** (UTI).¹⁸ Research supports this finding among humans,¹⁹ but interestingly, the same benefit may apply to pets as well.

According to a 2016 study that evaluated the effects of cranberry extract on the development of UTI's in dogs, the fruit's extract exhibits a short-term antimicrobial effect that may be helpful against the proliferation of E. coli related UTI's. Furthermore, the extract may fight multidrug-resistant bacteria in dogs with recurrent UTIs.²⁰

Cranberries are more than just UTI-fighting fruits. They contain various antioxidants as well, such as epicatechin, ursolic acid, caffeic acid, quercetin and kaempferol.²¹ Another notable antioxidant found in cranberries is quercetin. In fact, a study noted that cranberries are one of the best sources of quercetin, ounce per ounce.²²

In addition to various antioxidants, cranberries contain other nutrients as well, such as vitamin C, vitamin K and manganese.²³

Ideally, look for fresh, dry-harvested cranberries, which are grown on land, not in synthetically flooded bogs. They're typically available at natural grocers and farmers markets. If it's not possible for you to choose dry-harvested organic or spray-free cranberries for financial or availability reasons, conventionally grown varieties may still be consumed, but make sure to wash them thoroughly first.

Sources and References

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⁵ [Environmental Working Group, "Clean Fifteen 2023"](#)

⁶ [USDA Food Data Central, Avocado, raw](#)

⁷ [California Avocado Commission, "Avocado Nutritional Information"](#)

⁸ [The Journal of Nutrition, 2014 Aug;144\(8\):1158-1166](#)

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²³ [Cleveland Clinic, January 26, 2022](#)
