

Dogs Love This More Than Just About Anything – And It’s a Health Ally

Dogs go crazy over this treat. As catnip is to a cat, this is to a dog. And it helps a key organ system more than you think. But watch out for these caveats that affect certain dogs, existing health issues and more.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you’re looking for dog bones for your pet, raw recreational bones are the best choice
- Raw recreational bones are very tasty, provide mental stimulation and exercise for your dog’s jaws, and they also help to control dental plaque and tartar
- There are many sizes of raw recreational bones; it’s extremely important to get the right type and size for your dog
- Be very careful not to offer bones that are too small, as they can put your dog at risk of dental damage, choking or intestinal obstruction
- Be sure to follow common sense safety guidelines when offering raw recreational bones to your dog

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In my experience, the best dog bones for most canine companions are raw recreational bones. Dogs love to chew raw bones for the yummy taste, the mental stimulation and also because all that gnawing is great exercise for their jaw muscles. There are actually two types of raw bones, and it’s important to know the difference:

1. **Edible raw bones** are the hollow, non-weight-bearing bones of birds (typically chicken wings and chicken and turkey necks). They’re soft, pliable, don’t 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.
2. **Recreational raw bones** are big chunks of beef, bison or other large land mammal femur, knee or hipbones filled with marrow. They’re found in the freezer section of pet food boutiques or at the local butcher shop. 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.

Types and Sizes of Recreational Raw Bones

Bones come from a variety of body parts, and in a variety of sizes, but they're not appropriate for all dogs. For instance, rib bones are narrow and are fine for gentle chewers, but they're not what you want to give aggressive chewers. If you give a narrow bone to an aggressive chewer, he'll start breaking it down into small pieces quickly and quite easily.

Raw femur bones and knucklebones or "soup bones" also come in a variety of sizes. Again, it's important to match the size of the bone to the size of the dog, so whereas a big beef knucklebone is fine for most large breed dogs, a smaller venison femur would not be.

Butchers sometimes cut femurs into different size bones. I don't recommend giving small femur rings, which are often sold in packages of three or six in the freezer section (or, as another example, kneecaps), to large breed dogs, because they often attempt to swallow them whole. Bones cut lengthwise can also be a problem for some dogs as they have sharp edges that aggressive chewers can cut their mouths on.

The bottom line is that it's almost impossible to offer a bone that's too big, but you can offer bones that are too small for your dog, putting her at risk of dental damage, choking or intestinal obstruction.

12 Rules for Offering Raw Recreational Bones to Your Dog

- You should be able to find raw (not steamed, boiled, basted, irradiated 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. Bones that are not sold frozen have been processed to be shelf-stable, so I don't recommend them.
- Don't choose bones that have been cut lengthwise, such as leg bones. Cut bones are more likely to splinter and cause mouth trauma. And don't feed pork bones or rib bones to aggressive chewers or large dogs, as they're more likely to splinter than other types of bones.
- Match the bone size to your dog's head. 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 big chunks. If your pet breaks off large pieces of raw bone, collect them before she has the opportunity to swallow them.
- Offer bones when your dog is 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.
- 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.

- Always closely supervise your dog when he's working on a bone. Don't allow him to carry it 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 marrowbones in one sitting are often not good candidates for knucklebones because they can't distinguish 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.
- 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. After all, bones are the most delicious things on the planet to dogs and they don't want to share!
- 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 gastrointestinal (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.

- 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.
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