

# The Best Food for Pets with Tummy Troubles – Not What You've Probably Been Told

Dogs are indiscriminate eaters, and as such are prone to tummy troubles. Question is, what do you feed them at that point? Most conventional vets say one thing. But their advice is riddled with certain problems. Here are the tweaks you need to resolve those issues.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are some new products on the pet food market fashioned after the traditional bland diet designed for dogs with digestive issues
- While these foods may be of excellent quality and convenient, the classic ingredients used in most bland diets are not recommended
- The usual boiled chicken or hamburger and white rice bland diet is too high in fat and grain content
- The best fiber for pets with tummy troubles is pumpkin, not rice or other grains
- The best protein source is turkey because of its low fat content

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The pet product company Under the Weather, which started in 2015, offers only diets for sick dogs. They're definitely not your typical processed, low-quality therapeutic or prescription pet food.

Based on their company's package labels, ads and website, the formulas are made of 100% human-grade meat (chicken or bison), and all the ingredients are raised or grown in the U.S. These are definitely pluses.

According to the company, their freeze-dried diets are "... designed to soothe a dog's digestive tract during times of upset, such as vomiting or diarrhea."<sup>1</sup> They also state the diets are "... only to be used until healthy digestion is restored and the stool is normal for [two to three] days." These are intelligent feeding guidelines.

The Under the Weather diets are intended as a convenient way for pet parents to feed a bland diet to a dog with temporary tummy troubles. Instead of having to cook chicken or hamburger as part of the traditionally prescribed bland diet, pet parents can grab a packet of Under the Weather and just add water.

On the surface, these products seem like a wholesome and super easy way to offer your dog a bland diet. However, the biggest problem with them is that one formula contains rice, and the other contains oatmeal. In general, the standard bland diet still prescribed by most veterinarians (which is what the Under the Weather formulas are based on) is typically 3 parts white rice and 1 part boiled chicken or hamburger meat.

A more appropriate bland diet uses ground turkey, which is a lower fat protein source (so it's easier to process for pets with pancreatic inflammation), and more importantly, pumpkin, because it's the perfect fiber for most pets with digestive issues. A basic knowledge of the different types of fiber is important in understanding what effect each type will have on an animal's body.

## **Fiber: Dietary Versus Functional**

Fiber, which is actually the tiny threadlike structures in fruits, vegetables and grains, has traditionally been defined as the remnants of plant cells that are resistant to digestion, which includes lignans, cellulose and the indigestible carbohydrates found in plants.<sup>2</sup> However, by definition this omits indigestible carbs found in animal sources, such as chitin, as well as fructooligosaccharides (FOS) and other digestible carbs that are resistant to digestive enzymes in the gut.

For this reason, in 2001 the Institute of Medicine developed definitions of fiber that distinguished between fiber that occurs naturally in foods (dietary fiber) and other isolated fibers that may be added to foods or dietary supplements (functional fiber). Examples of specific types of dietary fiber found in plants are cellulose, hemicellulose, lignins, beta-glucans and resistant starches (found in bananas and legumes). Examples of functional fiber are inulin, oligofructose, plant gums and pectins.

## **Fiber: Viscous Versus Nonviscous**

Fiber can also be classified as viscous and nonviscous, based on its consistency when mixed with water. If the fiber gels in water, as pectins, beta-glucans, psyllium and some gums do, it's considered viscous. Viscous fiber slows gastric emptying time, can delay the absorption of some nutrients (including sugars) in the small intestine and lowers cholesterol.<sup>3,4</sup>

## **Fiber: Soluble Versus Insoluble**

Fiber is further classified as soluble and insoluble. Soluble fiber, such as beta-glucans, gums, most pectins and psyllium, disperses easily when stirred into water. Cellulose and lignins do not disperse in water, so they're classified as insoluble fiber.

Research shows that a fiber's solubility does not predict its effect on the body, as previously thought. Soluble fibers bind with fatty acids and slow digestion, which can have a stabilizing effect on an animal's blood sugar levels. Soluble fiber has also been shown to help lower cholesterol in humans.<sup>5,6</sup>

Both insoluble and soluble fibers can be fermentable, and most whole plant fibers contain both soluble and insoluble fiber. Insoluble fiber provides roughage, which helps to bulk up the stool and move waste products through the intestine. Because of this, insoluble fiber prevents constipation and keeps pets regular.

Almost all pet parents and many veterinarians lump all fiber into this category, assuming all fiber creates the same laxative effect in the gut. However, some fiber, such as the pectins found in bananas, is actually binding and potentially constipating to mammals.

Banana pectins draw water out of the feces, putting it back into the body. When water leaves the colon, harder stools are the result. But in the case of diarrhea, adding a small amount of **mashed banana** to your dog's bland diet (if he'll eat it) can often help reduce the incidence of loose stools.

## **Fiber: Fermentable Versus Nonfermentable**

In addition to solubility and viscosity, fiber is also classified as fermentable, partially fermentable and nonfermentable. Fermentable fiber sources, such as pectins, beta-glucans, guar gum, inulin and oligofructose, provide a food source for the billions of bacteria naturally found in your pet's gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Some fiber sources, such as cellulose and lignin, are nonfermentable. In general, fruit and vegetable fibers are fermentable and grain fibers are nonfermentable.

Current fiber research is focused on the actions and influence of certain types of fermentable fiber in feeding beneficial bacteria in the GI tract. The GI tract is the largest immune organ in the body. GI lymph tissue, called Peyer's patches, as well as Gut Associated Lymphoid Tissue (GALT) is impacted by the balance and health of the microbial microenvironment (the gut microbiome).

Scientists are evaluating how foods can help heal or harm this critically important bacterial balance within your pet's gut, and fermentable fiber can play a huge role in modulating your pet's GI defenses for the better.

## **Why Pumpkin Is Better Than Rice in Your Pet's Bland Diet**

Canned pumpkin (100% pumpkin, not pumpkin pie filling) provides about 80 calories and 7 grams of soluble fiber per cup, compared to 1.2 grams of fiber in a cup of cooked white rice. Pumpkin is very rich in soluble fiber (the type that dissolves in water to form a viscous gel) that coats and soothes irritated bowels. Soluble fiber also delays gastric emptying, slowing down GI transit times, and therefore the number of episodes of diarrhea.

When your dog has diarrhea, she can lose important electrolytes, including potassium, which puts her at risk of dehydration. Hypokalemia, or low potassium levels, can result in cramping, fatigue, weakness and heart rate irregularities. Pumpkin happens to be an excellent source of potassium, with 505 milligrams per cup.

Pumpkin is also safer for diabetic pets. Unlike rice, which is a grain that ultimately breaks down into sugar, pumpkin extracts may actually restore beta cell function.<sup>7</sup> Beta cells are the cells that produce insulin in the pancreas.

Rice is a bland source of fiber, but it isn't the most species-appropriate choice for a recovery diet for carnivores, nor is oatmeal. Dogs have no nutritional requirement for grain, so feeding a proinflammatory food to treat GI upset makes no sense. Additionally, the FDA has issued a potential warning about arsenic loads in white rice.<sup>8</sup>

## **Why Ground Turkey Is Better Than Other Protein Sources**

Turkey is lower in fat than hamburger and chicken (and bison meat). Fat can worsen GI upset and exacerbate pancreatitis. Rinsing boiled or baked meat removes surface fat, but it can't remove the fat that remains in the flesh.

For this reason, fat-free meat is better for bland diets. You can easily find fat-free ground turkey or turkey breast in most grocery stores, along with 100% solid packed pumpkin in the baking aisle (make sure it's not pumpkin pie filling). If you prefer organic and non-GMO foods, look for fresh organic pumpkin and turkey meat.

## Alternatives for Allergic Pets

If your dog won't eat pumpkin, use skinless, cooked, mashed sweet potatoes (white potatoes will do in a pinch). If he seems to have trouble with turkey meat, you can substitute cooked chicken breast or codfish (though both are higher in fat than turkey).

If your dog's diarrhea doesn't resolve in 48 hours, he grows lethargic or is acting like he's sick, it's time to visit your veterinarian. If a bland diet resolves the diarrhea, you can transition him back to his regular food 24 hours after his stools have returned to a normal consistency. It's important to remember that bland diets are for recovery only. They aren't nutritionally balanced and shouldn't be fed long term.

## Sources and References

[Under the Weather](#)

<sup>1</sup> [dvm360](#)

<sup>2</sup> [European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, December 2000, Vol. 54, Issue 12, pp 861-4](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Dietary Fiber. In: Stipanuk MH, ed. Biochemical and Physiological Aspects of Human Nutrition. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders; 2000:143-154](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Present Knowledge in Nutrition. 8th ed. Washington, D.C.: ILSI Press; 2001:83-91](#)

<sup>5</sup> [American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, October 2010, Vol. 92, Issue 4, pp 723-32](#)

<sup>6</sup> [American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, March 2006, Vol. 83, Issue 3, pp 601-5](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Nutrition Review, April 2013](#)

<sup>8</sup> [FDA.gov](#)

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