

Dogs Love These but They Can Crack Teeth and Become a Choking Hazard

They may drool over the flavor, but they're beset with problems galore — ranging from pathogenic bacteria, to choking and GI blockage hazards that could prove fatal. They're best left on the store shelf, to spare your pup this agony and rescue your wallet.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Two important questions dog parents should ask before offering their pet a bone or chew are: 1) Is it nontoxic, and 2) Is it a good fit for my dog?
- There are significant differences between raw and "room temperature" bones and it's important to know the difference; choose raw recreational bones whenever possible
- The type of chewer your dog is determines the best type of bone or chew for him, along with his oral and physical health
- There are many types of dog chews on the market, including pizzles, tendon chews, pig ears and fully edible chews
- Two types of chews that are never recommended are rawhide chews and synthetic chews

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Two questions every dog parent needs to ask before feeding recreational bones or chews to their pet are:

1. Is it nontoxic?
2. Is it a good fit for my dog?

Whether a bone or chew is toxic has to do with the country of origin, the source of the product and how it was processed. You'll want to look for "Made in the USA" labels on packaging (and perhaps even call the manufacturer to ask whether all the ingredients were also made in the U.S.).

If you're buying imported bones or chews, you'll want to feel comfortable about those sources as well. Avoid unlabeled bulk items out of bulk bins, because it's impossible to know where the product came from, how it was processed, how long it's been sitting in the bin, etc.

Whether a bone or chew is a good size for your dog is really a matter of common sense. Does the size present a potential choking or intestinal obstruction hazard? For instance, if a piece of bone breaks off and your dog swallows it, could it get stuck somewhere in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract? Also, is the bone too hard or dense relative to the condition of your dog's teeth and gums?

You'll also want to think about the ingredients in the product. What nutrients does it provide? Does it contain additives? Does it contain opportunistic pathogens that could make your dog sick? Also, some bones are naturally high in fat, so you wouldn't want to offer those bones to a dog with a history of pancreatitis.

Raw Versus Room Temperature

Real beef and bison bones come steamed, smoked or raw. Steamed and smoked bones have been treated so they won't spoil at room temperature. Through that process, the chemical structure of the bone changes and it becomes more brittle. Brittle bones fracture easily, so these bones aren't appropriate for aggressive chewers.

Bones of all sizes can be preserved, so the way to tell the difference between treated bones and raw bones is you won't find the former in the freezer or refrigerator section. They'll be sitting on open store shelves at room temperature.

Remember that all meat bones and chews stored at room temperature have the potential to grow opportunistic bacteria over time. Some products are marked as having been irradiated to remove harmful bacteria. Some people feel more comfortable purchasing irradiated bones and chews, and some people don't. If you don't, it's especially important to know the source of the product, the supplier, and the turnover time before you offer these items to your pet.

If you opt to buy frozen bones (which aren't irradiated), once the bones thaw, you need to be aware of the potential for bacterial growth because they can attract bacteria over time at room temperature.

Different Bones for Different Types of Chewers

It's imperative that you match the size of the bone or chew with the personality, size and health of your dog. Don't assume the bone or chew your neighbor feeds his dog, or the one you fed your last dog, will also work for your current pet.

- **If your dog is a "scarfer"** — Some small dogs, and many large dogs, are scarfers. If your pet tends to scarf down every morsel he's offered, you'll need to be cautious about any size bone you feed him, because there's a chance it could end up in his stomach whole. Or he may attempt to swallow it whole and fail, which can be just as disastrous.

A scarfer's primary objective isn't to chew or gnaw, but to get the item into his stomach as soon as possible. So a safety tip for all sized scarfers is, go big. Whether your dog is a Labrador or a Yorkie, if you offer a recreational bone larger than the size of his head, it makes it nearly impossible for him to scarf. And some pathologic scarfers are not candidates for any bones at all.

- **If your dog is an aggressive chewer** — These dogs have one mission, which is to finish the bone! Aggressive chewers want to consume the thing in its entirety, as soon as possible. The problem many aggressive chewers develop is fractured teeth. They think nothing of creating multiple slab fractures in their mission to break the bone down as quickly as possible. These dogs get hold of a bone and chew like mad, fracturing or wearing down their teeth very quickly.

Aggressive chewers shouldn't be given really hard bones like antlers. Offering rock hard bones to hard chewers can create really significant dental trauma. Veterinary dentists keep very busy thanks to antler bones

and the wrong size marrowbones offered to aggressive chewers!

Aggressive chewers also shouldn't be given narrow bones that fit nicely into their mouths, allowing them to apply a strong vertical bite force. If you offer a strong chewer small, narrow femur rings or narrow antlers, you're asking for trouble.

Aggressive chewers are good candidates for big, raw knucklebones, which are much softer than antlers and gentler on the teeth. Commercially made, 100% edible "bones" (made with human-grade ingredients) are also good choices for aggressive chewers.

It's also important to supervise your dog's chewing very closely, because an aggressive chewer with big jaws can whittle a very large bone down to the size of a ping-pong ball in short order. Once a bone is that small, it's too small to be safe, so it's important to watch your dog closely and when he's worked a bone down significantly, it's time to take it away.

- **If your dog is a soft chewer** — If your dog happens to be a soft chewer who just enjoys holding or gently gnawing on a bone, antlers are a good choice. Antlers are very strong bones and they tend to last forever. You can purchase elk, moose or deer antlers, and they're very economical because they just don't wear down.

Antlers come in a variety of sizes and can be split, cut or whole, but again, you don't want to give a small antler to a large dog because of the potential for tooth fracture. Giving small antlers to small dogs and big antlers to big dogs is fine as long as they're gentle chewers.

If your dog is a soft chewer because of age, sensitive teeth or restorative dental work, it's a good idea to go with even softer "bones." Thankfully, there are several commercially available 100% edible "bones" made with human-grade ingredients that are much more pliable than true skeletal bones from mammals.

- **If your dog is overweight, requires a low-fat diet or is new to raw bones** — Many raw long bones contain marrow, which is very high in fat. The risk of offering a dog a giant marrowbone is that instinctively she will focus on getting the marrow out of the bone, which can cause significant digestive disturbances in dogs that aren't used to consuming a treat that's 60% fat.

Marrow is also a substantial source of calories, so while raw bones are wonderful, for pets already struggling with too much weight a lower fat option is recommended. Take a marrowbone and scoop the marrow out to make it a fat-free bone, then replace the marrow with canned 100% pumpkin and refreeze the bone.

When you take it out of the freezer to offer to your dog, you've got a frozen, pumpkin-stuffed bone that has substantially less fat than a marrow-filled bone.

The Type of Bone That Are Never Recommended

Hooves are the least favorite bone to offer dogs because they're sharp and brittle. Many pets have suffered severe oral trauma from chewing sharp hooves. Veterinarians see more cut mouths from hooves than any other type of recreational bone. If you do offer hooves, please feed your pet only American-grown hooves to insure they're coming from nontoxic animals.

Dog Chews 101

Human food manufacturers have figured out how to market almost all leftover animal body parts to the dog treat industry, from traditional beef rawhides to the now-popular pizzles, tracheas and flossies. All types of skin, tendons, ligaments, and other soft tissue and cartilaginous body parts are made into dog chews.

- **Rawhide chews** — Let's start by taking a look at the oldest chew on the market, the old-fashioned rawhide. The name "rawhide" is technically incorrect. A more accurate name would be processed-hide, because the skin isn't raw at all. But the term "rawhide" has stuck.

These are among the least-favorite chews for dogs. Not only are rawhide chews high in calories, but they're often found on lists of pet poisons and have other problems as well.

- **Tendon chews** — These chews are long and slender, and many dogs love them. Like rawhides, these types of chews can also become very soft and pliable as your dog works on them over time. Because they are ropey, and some of them are very small, long and thin, they present a significant choking risk for most dogs. These chews come from a variety of different animal sources, but the small ones are risky for even the tiniest dog.

Buy tendon chews from stores with good product turnover. The chews should be labeled as to their origin and ingredients, and get the very long ones so that when your dog works them down you can discard them rather than risk your dog swallowing the last of them whole.

- **Pizzles** — Pizzles (which are penises, for the uninitiated) can be very small. It's just too risky. So even if your dog is a very gentle chewer, buy very long pizzles and when she wears it down, you should pick up and discard it. As a good rule of thumb, remove any chew once you can't see it sticking out two inches on either side of your dog's mouth.
- **Pig ears** — Pig ears are very popular dog chews, but one concern about them and ears from any mass-produced food animal, is that the ears are a very common location for hormone implants.

If this is the case with the ears you're buying, your dog is consuming an abnormally high amount of concentrated hormone residues, which over time can be detrimental to her health. If you're able to find ears from free-range, organically raised animals, then obviously you can avoid the problem.

- **Fully edible chews** — Some of the newer chews on the market don't contain any animal parts at all. The healthy options are made with milk, human-grade tapioca or potatoes (or compressed vegetables). These are an excellent choice for pets who've had dental work, have tender mouths or are scarfers. These chews are designed to be consumed in their entirety.

If you're trying to train your dog not to scarf his bones or chews, you can hold one end of these chews while he works on the other end. When you hold one end while your dog chews the other, you can control the pace at which he chews. And if a small piece is chewed off, there's no danger if your dog swallows it. Don't offer these chews to scarfers without someone holding the other end, because they will attempt to swallow them whole, which is obviously a choking and GI blockage hazard.

Some of the edible dental bones on the market contain questionable ingredients. They're typically a green color and are sold in most big box stores. Read the labels on these chews very carefully.

Himalayan chews are made from yak milk (actually a cheese) that has been sun-dried to make it very hard. This is one of the more unique chews available on the market today and it can be a good option for dogs who

can't eat certain types of protein. There are also several other edible bones that are vegetable-based and appropriate for animals with sensitive stomachs.

The Type of Chew That Are Never Recommended

There are a variety of synthetic chews made of nylon or flavored plastic that you'll find in most big box stores (next to the green edible dental bones). Common sense tells us that feeding a dog synthetics isn't the healthiest option available! Thankfully, because there are so many natural chews and bones available, there's really no reason to offer synthetic products to your dog.
