

A Dog's Favorite Chew – Safe Delight or Hidden Risk?

Is your dog's favorite chew a health booster or a hidden hazard? Discover the truth about cartilage in this guide.

Reviewed by Dr. Arielle Walton

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cartilage is a popular dog chew because of its satisfying texture and potential health benefits, including support for joints, skin, and teeth
- Cooked cartilage is the safer option; boiling or steaming kills harmful bacteria and softens the texture, making it easier to digest
- Raw cartilage carries risks such as bacterial contamination, digestive upset, and choking, especially in puppies or small dogs
- Cartilage is best served in small, plain pieces under supervision and never seasoned or fried
- Moderation is key. Too much can cause stomach issues or disrupt your dog's balanced diet

If you've ever watched your dog gnaw happily on a chewy treat, you know the joy it brings them. Few things light up a dog's world like a good chew. You see the intense focus, the wagging tail, and the satisfied sigh afterward.

One chew that's gained popularity among dog owners is cartilage. People often praise it as a healthy, natural treat, especially for joint support. But here's the big question: Is cartilage truly a safe delight, or could it hide risks you might not see coming?

Let's explore the truth behind this chewy favorite so you can make the best decisions for your furry best friend.

What Is Cartilage, and Why Do Dogs Love It?

Cartilage is the tough but flexible tissue found in joints, ears, and between bones. It's a bit rubbery, not as hard as bone, but not soft like meat either. Dogs naturally love chewing it because of its texture; it gives them something satisfying to tear, crush, and chew.

But beyond the chewing fun, cartilage is also packed with nutrients. It contains glucosamine, chondroitin, collagen, protein, and calcium — all things that can help support your dog's body, especially their joints, bones, and skin.¹

Cartilage Benefits — Why Some Call It a 'Super-Chew'

When prepared safely, cartilage offers a range of benefits: it's more than just a satisfying chew. Cartilage can support your dog's joints, strengthen their teeth, and boost overall wellness. Below are some of its standout benefits.²

1. **Joint health support** — Cartilage is rich in glucosamine and chondroitin, two natural substances that help support healthy joints and reduce inflammation. Many senior dogs or those with arthritis take supplements with these ingredients. Feeding cartilage can be a natural way to get these joint-friendly nutrients.
2. **Protein power** — Cartilage contains protein, which helps build strong muscles and supports overall growth and energy. For active or growing dogs, this can be a nice bonus to their regular meals.
3. **Healthy skin and coat** — Thanks to its collagen content, cartilage may also help improve your dog's skin and coat. Collagen supports skin elasticity and hydration, and a shiny coat is often a sign of a well-fed, happy dog.
4. **Natural dental cleaning** — Chewing on cartilage can help scrape off plaque and massage gums, acting like a natural toothbrush. It's not a replacement for brushing, but it can support better oral hygiene.

There Are Certain Risks To Be Wary About Cartilage

While cartilage can be healthy, it's not risk-free. Here's what you need to know before handing your dog a piece of chewy cartilage:^{3,4,5}

1. **Raw cartilage can be risky** — It might sound like a natural treat, but it can carry harmful bacteria like *Salmonella* or *Campylobacter*. These bacteria can upset your dog's stomach or even make them seriously ill. It can also be harder to digest when raw. Some dogs may vomit, get diarrhea, or show signs of discomfort after eating it.
2. **Choking and digestive dangers** — Large or sharp pieces of cartilage can pose a choking hazard or cause intestinal blockages. Especially in small dogs or puppies, a piece that's too big or too tough can get lodged in their throat or digestive tract. And even if they manage to swallow it, undigested pieces might cause vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, and digestive injuries later on.
3. **Puppies should avoid it** — Puppies have developing digestive systems. Giving them cartilage too soon can overwhelm their stomach and cause problems. It's best to wait until your pup is older and has a stronger tummy before introducing cartilage into their diet.

Cooked vs. Raw — The Big Debate

When it comes to feeding cartilage, many dog owners face the question: Is raw cartilage better than cooked?

At first glance, raw cartilage might seem more natural. After all, wild dogs and wolves have eaten raw tissue for centuries. But modern veterinary advice is more cautious. Today, safety, digestion, and bacterial concerns mean that cooked cartilage is almost always the better choice for your dog.

Veterinarians widely recommend cooked cartilage as the safer alternative. Boiling or steaming kills bacteria like *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, and also softens the texture, making it easier for dogs to chew and digest.^{6,7} This is especially helpful for senior dogs or those with sensitive stomachs, as it reduces the risk of digestive upset or choking.

Cooking cartilage also breaks down some of the tougher fibers, allowing better nutrient absorption of key compounds such as glucosamine, chondroitin, and collagen. That means your dog can still enjoy the benefits without the risks of raw feeding.

However, it's important to prepare cartilage plain, never seasoned. Ingredients like onions and salt, which are common in human food, can be toxic to dogs even in small amounts.

How to Feed Cartilage Safely

When served correctly, cartilage can be a nutritious and satisfying treat for your pet. But handled incorrectly, it can become a hazard. Keep these tips in mind when preparing cartilage:^{8,9}

- Cook it the right way** — The safest way to feed cartilage is by cooking it, either by boiling or steaming. These methods soften the texture and kill off any harmful bacteria that might be present, especially if the cartilage comes from raw poultry or beef. Avoid baking or frying, as these methods can over-harden the cartilage, making it challenging to chew and more likely to splinter.
- Cut it into small pieces** — Before serving, cut or break the cartilage into small, manageable pieces based on your dog's size and chewing ability. Large chunks can pose a choking risk, especially for smaller breeds or dogs that tend to gulp their food. Small pieces are easier to chew, digest, and portion throughout the week.
- Always supervise chewing time** — No matter how experienced your dog is with treats, you should always keep an eye on them when they're chewing cartilage. Dogs can get overly enthusiastic and bite off more than they can handle. If you see a piece starting to splinter or break down into a sharp shard, take it away right away to prevent choking or injury.
- Look for vet-approved cartilage treats** — Many pet stores now carry dehydrated or freeze-dried cartilage snacks explicitly designed for dogs. These treats are typically prepared to ensure safety and digestibility. Choose products that are labeled natural, free from additives, and ideally recommended by veterinarians. These treats offer the benefits of cartilage without the need to prepare it yourself.
- Introduce it slowly** — If it's your dog's first time trying cartilage, start with a very small portion. Monitor their reaction over the next 24 hours. Look for signs of digestive upset, such as vomiting, gas, or diarrhea. Some dogs may be sensitive to rich or unfamiliar foods, so ease into it slowly.
- Store leftovers properly** — Like any meat product, cooked cartilage can spoil if left out too long. Refrigerate leftovers in a sealed container and use them within a few days. Never offer cartilage that smells off or shows signs of mold. Freshness matters — not just for taste, but for your dog's health.
- Never serve seasoned or spiced cartilage** — Cartilage prepared for human meals, especially if it includes spices, marinades, or sauces, should never be fed to dogs. Ingredients like onion, salt, and certain seasonings can be toxic. Even small amounts can cause serious health problems, from gastrointestinal distress to organ damage.
- Don't leave your dog unattended while chewing** — Even the most experienced chewers can run into trouble. Cartilage can break apart unpredictably, and large or jagged pieces can become lodged in the throat or swallowed whole. Always supervise chew time, and take away any fragments that look like they might pose a risk.

How Much Cartilage Is Too Much?

While cartilage can offer a nice boost of joint-friendly nutrients, it's important to remember that it should never replace your dog's regular meals. Cartilage is best as a supplemental snack, not a staple food. Think of it the same way you'd think about a dog biscuit or training treat, something extra, given in moderation.

For most dogs, a few small pieces of cooked cartilage per week is more than enough to provide health benefits without causing problems. The ideal portion depends on your dog's size, age, and overall health. A large adult dog might be able to handle a bit more than a toy breed or a senior pup, but even big dogs should avoid daily servings unless directed by a veterinarian.

Feeding too much cartilage, especially all at once or too frequently, can disrupt your dog's digestion. Some common signs of overdoing it include an upset stomach, excessive gas, loose stools, or even vomiting. Over time, consistently high amounts of cartilage can lead to poor nutrient balance, as your dog fills up on cartilage and misses out on the complete nutrition from their regular food.

There's also a risk of unintentional weight gain if cartilage is fed too often as an added treat, especially for less active or older dogs. Even natural snacks add calories, so it's essential to account for them as part of your dog's overall diet plan.

If you're unsure how much is right for your specific dog, it's always a good idea to ask your veterinarian. They can provide personalized guidance based on your dog's health history, weight, and dietary needs.

In short, cartilage can be a helpful addition, but like anything else, moderation is key. A little goes a long way in supporting your dog's health without tipping the balance in the wrong direction.

So, Is Cartilage a Safe Delight or a Hidden Risk?

The answer is both. When appropriately prepared and given in moderation, cooked cartilage can be a healthy, natural treat that supports joint health, dental care, and overall happiness. But when given raw, unsupervised, or in large pieces, cartilage can quickly turn from treat to trouble.

Your best bet? Choose vet-approved, cooked, and sized-right cartilage products and always watch your dog as they enjoy their chew because nothing feels better than watching your dog chew safely, happily, and healthily.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3,7,8} [Puppy Simply, August 15, 2025](#)

^{4,6,9} [Modern Vet, October 27, 2024](#)

⁵ [Hepper Blog, December 23, 2025](#)