

Grains and raw foods: the long and short of it

Grains are not a natural part of a wild dog or cat's diet. Dogs and cats do not have dietary requirements for complex carbohydrates. Grains must be cooked or sprouted and thoroughly chewed (which carnivores do not do) in order to be digested. What does this mean? Your pet should consume less grains, or none at all. Why have we assumed our pets need grains in their diets? Pet food companies know dogs and cats need meat to meet their nutritional needs. They also know that an all-meat pet food would be incredibly expensive to mass-produce, so years ago companies began adding grains to commercial diets to cut costs and provide an inexpensive filler. Some popular dog and cat foods can contain up to 70% grain. To make the consumer feel they are feeding a more meat-based diet, companies split up the grains and list them separately on the label. But don't be fooled...add up all the grains on the label and in most commercial foods, they compose at least twice the volume of meat contained in the diet. The quality of grains is also something to question (see "What's really in pet foods" handout).

So what if I feed grains? Some pets handle the unnatural carbo-loading amazingly well. They get by with few side effects of consuming a disproportionate amount of carbohydrates. However, many dogs and cats do begin to have a problem with a grain-based diet. Grains foster an inflammatory response, which exacerbates chronic skin problems, allergies, degenerative joint disease and gastrointestinal problems (Inflammatory Bowel Disease, chronic diarrhea, mucus stools, vomiting and excessive smelly gas, to name a few). It creates an alkaline urine pH which fosters urinary tract infections, crystals and bladder stones. We know that cancer feeds off carbohydrates so pets with cancer should consume little to no grains. Grains overwork the pancreas, making it difficult to produce enough digestive enzymes (amylase), which can lead to pancreatitis.

The very short gastrointestinal (G.I.) tracts of our carnivorous friends means that they were designed to handle raw protein-based meals, as compared to a horse or a cow (herbivores). These animals have very long, winding G.I. tracts that were meant to ferment grains. The carnivorous G.I tract was designed to handle all of the bacteria that accompanied a raw diet. Many of our companions would still catch, kill and eat squirrels, rabbits or birds in our yards if we let them. They would not get sick by doing this, but they may acquire parasites. U.S.D.A. meats are parasite free. Dogs bury bones for weeks, then dig up the putrified snacks and handle them with amazing ease and grace...as that's what their G.I. tracts were meant to do. Wild dogs, wolves, coyotes and bobcats have caught their dinners for thousands of years. You don't see any of them barbecuing in the woods. Before pet foods were invented 80 years ago, our pets were also fed their natural diet of fresh meats and vegetables. Then convenience dictated we should feed our dogs and cats the same processed, inorganic, sterile, rendered meat and grain kibble everyday of their lives. When you think about it, feeding your pet a natural raw food diet is not a "new" thing...it's actually the original way things were meant to be...the diet they ate for thousands of years before the invention of bagged foods with amazing shelf lives.

But bony meats? Yes bony...that means meat with the bones in it (i.e. chicken wings, backs and necks). Organ and muscle meats are wonderful, but our companions also need to consume a source of calcium. Cooked bones of any kind are potentially fatal, because they become brittle and can splinter. Raw bones are pliable and supply not only calcium but natural glucosamine and chondroitin for healthy joints. If your pet has never had the luxury of eating raw bones we recommend you offer them slowly. Sometimes dogs forget to chew because they are so excited to finally be getting real food. Beef knuckle bones provide great jaw exercise. This is what we recommend instead of raw hides.

We recommend you follow a specific raw food recipe that has done all of the protein, fat, trace mineral and vitamin balancing for you. This assures that you are meeting your pet's nutritional needs. Amounts of food vary depending on your pet's activity level, age and metabolism.