

FOOD AND NUTRITION (/CONTENT/FOOD-AND-NUTRITION)

10 Myths And Misperceptions About Homemade Dog Food

Nutritionwise

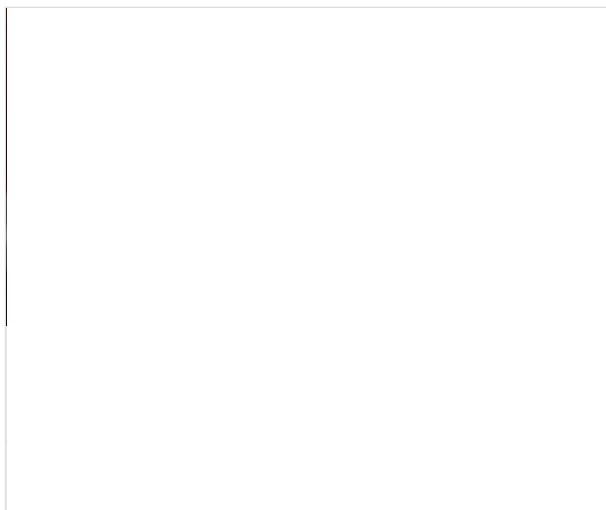
By Catherine Lane (/category/author/catherine-lane), May 2009, Updated February 2015



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It's been two years since the first melamine-related pet food recall, and during that time, more dog lovers than ever have decided to turn to homemade diets—cooked or raw—as insurance against potential problems with commercial products. Is a homemade diet really insurance? Yes, it can be, assuming it's nutritionally balanced and takes into account your dog's breed, age, weight, activity and overall physiology.

As a consulting canine nutrition specialist, I analyze hundreds of diets annually, and see firsthand what people are actually feeding their dogs. Here are a few common misperceptions I've encountered and my responses to them, which I hope will help Bark readers in their own efforts to improve their dogs' nutrition. (The following applies to adult dogs in good health; if your dog is a puppy, a senior or has health issues, be sure to consult with your veterinarian before making dietary changes.)



1. “Using fresh, wholesome foods will, over time, meet my dog’s needs if I vary the diet enough.”

There is some basis for this point of view; fresh foods are indeed more bioavailable than those made with highly processed ingredients. In addition, when an owner prepares food at home, she knows exactly what’s going into it. However, when analyzed, even diets based on wholesome, fresh ingredients can still come up low in various vitamins and minerals.

Bone up on your dog’s actual nutrient requirements by doing a bit of research; this means reading widely, speaking with nutritionists and vets (holistic, conventional and specialists), and starting to think in terms of both ingredients and nutrient needs. (See sidebar for a short “starter list” of online information sources.)

2. “A multivitamin added to the food will cover any gaps.”

The question here is this: Which multi, and with which diet? Any unsupplemented home-prepared diet will be low in some nutrients and adequate or high in others. But because there is no standard formulation for human multivitamins and they can vary greatly in what they include, just tossing one in the dish is not the answer.

Choosing an all-purpose multi made specifically for dogs doesn't necessarily solve the problem either. These usually contain very low levels of nutrients because it's assumed they will be added to commercial food, and so are unlikely to provide enough supplementation to round out a homemade diet. This is why "balanced" is not just a buzzword; it's a valid and essential aspect of proper nutrition. Once you understand your dog's nutritional needs, work out what her diet actually contains and then add what's missing.

3. "I'm adding yogurt to my dog's food daily so she's getting enough calcium."

Dogs require fairly high levels of calcium, and yogurt absolutely won't cut it. Here's a quick example: My own 75-pound dog has a daily requirement of 1,840 mgs of calcium, and since I use quite a bit of fiber in his diet in the form of brown rice, I want to offset any absorption issues and ensure that he gets about 2,000 mgs per day, or 14,000 mgs per week. His weekly diet alone—turkey, liver, sardines, brown rice, ground lamb and acorn squash—only provides 1,750 mgs. That means I need to add over 12,000 mgs of calcium; in other words, more than 40 cups of plain yogurt.

Calcium supplementation is always necessary unless you are feeding raw bones. I recommend using a commercial carbonate or citrate form of calcium, or an eggshell crushed into a fine powder—one teaspoon of this powder (about 5.5 grams) equals roughly 2,200 mgs of calcium carbonate. To use eggshells, rinse them well and then bake for about 10 minutes at 300 degrees; use a small grinder to make the powder. Bone meal can be used if there is also a need to add phosphorus, but many homemade diets supply plenty of this

mineral.

4. “I eat carefully and read human nutrition books—I just follow similar principles with my dog.”

This is a very common assumption but unfortunately, it isn't accurate. Current nutritional guidelines for humans—who are omnivores—emphasize foods and ratios that may not be ideal for dogs. Ensure dietary balance by aiming for about 30 to 35 percent of total calories from fats, 30 percent from protein and the balance from complex carbohydrates.

(Percentages are guidelines, but are not as accurate as evaluating the gram content of a diet; this is another place where it pays to do the math.)

5. “My dog had some loose stools, so cutting way down on fiber will correct that.”

Fiber is an important dietary component, and the type of fiber you use counts as much or more than the amount (fiber is commonly used to address both constipation and diarrhea problems).

If your dog has loose stools on a homemade diet, switch to bland meals or cut back on the amount of food by about 30 percent for a day or so, and watch for other symptoms that might indicate an illness or parasites. If the problem doesn't clear up within a few days, consult your veterinarian.

6. “I use a lot of fresh veggies in my dog's diet because they offer so many health benefits.”

Vegetables' role in the canine diet has been a topic of considerable discussion. One school of thought holds that adding them is inappropriate, since dogs are carnivores and do not need plant matter. Others emphasize the need for both veggies and fruit to boost not only essential nutrients but also phytochemicals that may provide protection from disease.

Unlike cats, who are obligate carnivores (animals who must get their primary nutrition from meat), dogs' systems are more accommodating, and vegetables offer a lot in the way of health benefits. But here again, we are faced with the all-important questions, “How much

and what type?” Some vegetables have elements that may interfere with the absorption of minerals, and others, such as those in the nightshade family—tomatoes, white potatoes, eggplants and peppers—contain solanine, an alkaloid that some theorize aggravates inflammation. Use veggies judiciously: Limit dark leafy greens—which contain high levels of oxalate and may contribute to bladder stones in dogs who are prone to them—and be conservative with nightshades. Green beans and carrots are usually safe bets, and pumpkin and sweet potatoes are well tolerated (unlike white potatoes, sweet potatoes are not in the nightshade family, but are high in calories and starch).

7. “Dogs don’t require carbs, and grains are bad for them.”

This is one of the most often-quoted—and misunderstood!—of all the ideas here. It seems to come from National Research Council studies, which conclude that dogs have no strict requirement for dietary carbohydrates. Briefly put, canines can metabolize adequate glucose (blood sugar) from a diet consisting of fat and protein alone.

All this means is that lack of carbohydrates will not lead to an identifiable deficiency in the way that a lack of Vitamin C in humans will produce scurvy. It does not, however, mean that a carb-free diet is a good idea. To complicate this issue, many people use the terms “carbohydrate” and “grain” interchangeably, thinking they’re following a no-carb diet because they have eliminated grains.

Complex carbohydrates provide energy and aid in healthy gastrointestinal function, and some portion of your dog’s homemade food should consist of brown rice, wild rice, quinoa, legumes (which also add protein) or starchy vegetables. Try to keep levels consistent so if need be, you can make adjustments.

8. “A raw diet is always superior to one that’s cooked—dogs fed raw do not get sick.”

Raw diets vary in type; some seek nutrient balance while others utilize a “prey model” approach, which mimics the diet of wolves or wild dogs as closely as possible. These diets have become hugely popular over the past decade, and to be sure, there are dogs who absolutely thrive on them. But some do not. As with a cooked diet, it’s essential to ensure proper formulation. Raw diets have drawbacks as well as benefits, and may not be suitable for every dog.

If you are planning to try a raw approach, do your homework. Research both within and outside the various raw communities that exist on the Internet. Talk to veterinarians and nutritionists, read widely, and take your time.

9. “Raw diets are a dangerous fad. I’d be scared to try it.”

For every home feeder who sings the praises of a raw diet, I hear another one say she wouldn’t dare use foods that aren’t cooked. It’s as much a mistake to assume that raw is uniformly dangerous as it is to insist it’s a viable solution for every dog. I often use raw diets for dogs with allergies, or proactively where there are no problems and the owner has expressed an interest. One great advantage of this approach is ease of preparation. Consider your own needs and lifestyle as well as your dog’s when making this all-important decision about feeding.

10. “Dogs of all ages can be fed a similar diet, as long as it’s made up of whole foods.”

This can be a dangerous misconception. Puppies’ diets need to have at least twice, and in some cases, as much as five times the nutrient content of an adult dog’s. But although they require more nutrients, hyper-nutrition can be a serious problem, particularly in giant breeds. At the other end of the age range, though it was long thought that reducing dietary protein was in the best interest of seniors, current findings suggest they may actually require more protein than adult dogs.

If you are new to home feeding, learn as much as you can about canine nutrition before introducing your puppy or senior to a homemade diet. Better yet, work with an experienced nutrition consultant who can help you formulate and adjust the diet according to your dog’s growth needs. For seniors in particular, have a full geriatric screening run at least semi-annually to ensure that liver and kidney values are within normal range; aberrations in these numbers often indicate a need for changes in dietary management. Though poor nutrition causes problems no matter what the dog’s age, growing dogs and seniors pose greater challenges to the novice home feeder than do adult dogs, and mistakes made here can have serious consequences.

So, here's the take-away message: A homemade diet remains a popular and potentially very healthy alternative or complement to the many premium foods on the market. However, research and planning are essential. Gather information from a wide range of sources, exercise a little caution, start slowly and don't forget to check in with your vet or nutrition specialist regularly to be sure the diet hasn't inadvertently drifted out of balance. Any diet on which your dog fails to thrive is a poor choice. If you see that your dog is not doing well on what you're feeding him, consider a change. He will thank you for it.

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Important: Many veterinarians, while acknowledging that pet food recalls and the poor quality of some pet foods are causes for concern, still feel that homemade diets, when fed exclusively, may result in nutritional imbalances and vitamin/mineral deficiencies that may pose threats to canine health. Therefore, if you choose to feed your dog a homemade diet, it is important that you understand and provide what your dog needs to stay healthy; veterinary nutritionists can assist in developing suitable homemade diets. While caution was taken to give safe recommendations and accurate instructions in this article, it is impossible to predict an individual dog's reaction to any food or ingredient. Readers should consult their vets and use personal judgment when applying this information to their own dogs' diets.

Starting Points

[National Research Council \(http://dels.nas.edu/banr/petdoor.html\)](http://dels.nas.edu/banr/petdoor.html)

Nutrient Requirements of Dogs

A pamphlet with basic information on canine nutrition can be downloaded for free, and the full report is available for purchase.

[Nutritiondata \(http://nutritiondata.com\)](http://nutritiondata.com)

Analyze a recipe's nutritional value; enter it in the database and see what it contains.

[USDA Nutrient Database \(http://nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search\)](http://nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search)

Become familiar with nutrient content. Enter one word that best describes the food item; if you don't get a match, check your spelling or try a related term.

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Illustration by Vivienne Flesher

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