

[UPDATED] Raw Feeding Primer: 10 Simple Rules To Get Started



By: [Dana Scott](#) -

Reading Time: 15 minutes

21k4.9k SHARES26k

Twenty-something years ago, I loved going to the pet store and dissecting bags of dog food and choosing the very best bag money could buy.

I'd take my expensive bag of food, complete with pictures of winning show dogs and plates of meats and vegetables, to the check-out counter thinking "what lucky dogs I have."

I can't remember exactly why I started feeding a raw dog food diet, but I did all the same. There were certainly enough compelling reasons to take that leap of faith. After just a few months of feeding my dogs kibble, I didn't see how food in a bag with an ingredient list that I couldn't even pronounce was the best choice for my dogs. And I wondered if those big companies with big marketing budgets really had my dogs' best interests at heart.

But you probably don't need the details of why I switched to raw because I'm assuming that, if you've read this far, you're ready to do the same. (And if you want a reason, check out this post: [Why Feed Raw.](#))

But if you're thinking of switching to raw ... you're probably a bit scared. You might be worried your dog will choke on bones or that his diet won't be balanced. And those are very valid concerns ...

I was really (like really) frightened feeding real bones to my dogs ... especially back then when nobody else was. I'll never forget lying on the floor, feeding my dog a raw chicken wing and thinking "This is it ... this is how I kill my dog."

I remember what it was like to start out and if you're scared, you have every right to be ... change is scary and you probably love your dog a lot (otherwise you'd just be tossing some Ol' Roy in a bowl instead of reading this post).

But I'm here to tell you, it will be the best change you can ever make for your dog. If you ask any dog owner who has fed raw for more than a few weeks if they would ever go back to kibble, 100% of them would say NEVER!

If you ask any dog owner who has fed raw for more than a few weeks if they would ever go back to kibble, 100% of them would say NEVER!

What that means is that the health benefits are so noticeable and you'll honestly feel so good about knowing what goes into your dog that you'll forget all about your scary first moments feeding the raw diet.

So if you're thinking of maybe switching to raw, then I applaud you and I want to make it as easy and not-so-scary as possible for you. I'll summarize what I've learned from feeding dozens of dogs and puppies a raw diet over the last twenty years and make it as easy as possible for you to get started.

Just be sure to read all ten of the rules right to the end ... while they're easy to follow, each one is important and will make sure your dog's raw diet is balanced and safe.

The Raw Dog Food Diet Primer

What I'm going to share with you is the result of successfully feeding and raising a lot of dogs ... and my job means I'm friends with a lot of really smart PhD veterinarians who've helped me along the way and know a thing or two about raw feeding. My dogs are lucky to have this kind of team behind them ... and I want to give you the same veterinary-approved plan for your own dog.

That doesn't mean that my way is the only way to feed raw ... but it's the result of a lot of research and it's as scientifically sound as I can make it (because we really know so little about nutrition).

What follows is what I hope is a very simple explanation of some very complicated science and math. Let's jump right in!

The 10 Simple Raw Feeding Rules

Let's break the raw diet into some simple rules. If you get these rules right, you'll get the raw diet right (I promise ... just follow these rules and your dog will do just fine).

Rule # 1: The Raw Dog Food Diet Must Have Calcium

Dogs, and especially puppies, need a solid source of minerals, especially calcium and phosphorus. Your dog wouldn't survive without them.

To get enough calcium and keep a healthy balance of minerals, your dog's raw diet needs to contain about 12% to 15% bone.

If you feed your dog bones, you'll mostly get the minerals right. The most important ones to worry about are calcium and phosphorus. Both dogs and growing puppies need enough calcium in their diet. And they need some phosphorus to go with it because these minerals work closely together. Bones contain both calcium and phosphorus.

On the other hand, meat is high in phosphorus and too low in calcium. An all-meat diet will certainly cause bone and nervous system issues in your dog and severe bone issues in growing puppies. So you need bone in the diet ...

To get enough calcium and keep a healthy balance of minerals, your dog's raw diet needs to contain about 12% to 15% bone. To make things simpler, this means about 1/3 of his diet should be nice meaty bones. Here are some good choices for meaty bones:

- Chicken wings, necks, legs or thighs
- Turkey necks (other bones are large)
- Beef tail bones (great for larger dogs)
- Lamb or goat necks or ribs

You can also feed your dog whole animals such as whole fish, whole rabbit and whole poultry. These contain just the right amount of bone. Raw eggs with the shell on also contain the right ratio of calcium and phosphorus (just be sure they're from the farm ... grocery store eggs have a toxic spray in their shells).

Rule #2: Organs Are the Multi-Vitamins

I think the number two mistake raw feeders make with a raw dog food diet (I'll talk about the #1 mistake soon) is not feeding enough organs. Organs are the nutrient-rich parts of the animal and without them, your dog could be missing some important vitamins.

Organs are the nutrient-rich parts of the animal and without them, your dog could be missing some important vitamins.

Overall, you'll want to feed anywhere from 10% to 30% organ meats. But this depends on how much you can get. If you can only find liver, just feed 10% organs. If you're lucky and you can find kidney, spleen, pancreas, brain and other delicious, nutritious organs, then feed them as a third of your dog's diet. But never feed that much liver ... limit it to 10% because it's really high in vitamin A and can give your dog some messy diarrhea if you give too much. The same applies to any organ ... no one organ should be more than 5% to 10% of your dog's diet, but if you have a few different ones, they can be 1/3 of your dog's total meals.

Organs would include:

- Liver
- Kidney
- Spleen
- Pancreas*
- Thymus*
- Brain

- Lung
- Testicles

* Pancreas and thymus are both sold under the name sweetbreads.

Just go easy on the organ meat at first because it can cause loose stools until your dog is used to it. If your dog doesn't like the taste at first, try frying it for a minute or so first.

Rule #3: Muscle Meat Is the Foundation

Once you get your meaty bones and organs in place, the rest of your dog's diet should be nice lean meats. That means half to a third of his total food, depending on how much organ meat you can get your hands on. These are the protein-rich component of your dog's diet and he needs proteins to build strong tissues, as well as the hormones and enzymes he needs to survive and thrive.

Good choices for muscle meat include:

- Beef (ground beef, cheek meat, stewing beef)
- Beef heart (but not more than 5% of the diet as it's very rich)
- Bison (ground bison, stewing bison meat)
- Turkey (ground turkey, boneless thighs, breast meat, tenderloin)
- Lamb (stewing lamb, ground lamb, shoulder or breast meat)
- Pork (pork shoulder or butt, cushion meat, boneless rib meat, loin)
- Chicken (boneless thighs, breast meat)

Rule #4: Watch The Fat

If your dog's diet is too high in fat, I guarantee he won't be getting enough vitamins and minerals.

Fat is healthy for your dog ... it helps with nerve and immune function and is critical for skin health. But fat carries a downside ... fat contains

twice the number of calories as protein and it contains very few vitamins and minerals.

Remember I said I'd mention the #1 mistake when it comes to raw diets? It's feeding too much fat. If your dog's diet is too high in fat, I guarantee he won't be getting enough vitamins and minerals. The calories from the vitamin and mineral deficient fat will add up before your dog gets enough and you might start to see some long-term health issues if the fat is too high.

The main reason why so many raw feeders give their dogs too much fat is because cheaper meats contain a lot of fat. But if you watch for sales, you can get low fat meats at a good price.

Overall, you don't want fat to be much more than 10% and certainly no more than 20% of the diet. This doesn't mean no fat! Your dog needs fat, but just not so much of it that it robs him of other important nutrients.

Here are some examples of some high fat meats you'll want to avoid and low fat meats that are easy to find:

High

- Chicken necks with skin
- Chicken or turkey dark meat with skin
- Ground beef (85% lean or less)
- Pork belly
- Domestic duck

Low

- Chicken necks with no skin
- Chicken or turkey light meat with no skin
- Lean ground beef
- Pork loin
- Rabbit
- Most fish
- Most wild game (except duck)

Note: If you're able to feed your dog whole fish, whole rabbit, or other whole animals with the bone in, they're already balanced and you don't need to add extra meat. But if the carcass doesn't have organs, be sure to add those back in.

10 RAW FEEDING RULES FOR DOGS



1

The Raw Diet Must Have Calcium



2

Organs Are The Multi-vitamins



3

Muscle Meat Is The Foundation



4

Watch The Fat



5

Don't Get Hung Up On Fruit And Veg



6

Keep It Starch-free



7

Variety Counts



8

Balance Over Time



9

Feed Fish Once A Week



10

Relax

Rule #5: Don't Get Hung Up On Fruit and Veg

Should you add fruits and vegetables to your dog's raw diet? The short answer is it's really up to you. If you stick to the first four rules, your dog will get a nicely balanced raw diet with enough vitamins and minerals to do well.

But why end there?

Fruits and vegetables carry some unique benefits your dog can't get from animal products. And in the wild, your dog's ancestors ate a reasonable amount of grasses and berries ... and I like to think that they ate them for a reason (because animals are very good at sourcing out the foods their bodies need).

What benefits do fruits and vegetables offer that can't be found in meat?

Prebiotics (fiber) are indigestible plant fibers that feed important little bugs that live in your dog's gut (called probiotics).

Chlorophyll is the green pigment in plants that makes your dog's cells healthy detoxifies his liver and digestive system. It can also protect against cancer.

Carotenoids are important antioxidants that protect your dog from aging and disease. Carotenoids are found in yellow, orange and red colored fruits and vegetables like squash, carrots, papaya, cantaloupe.

Lycopene is another powerful antioxidant that can play a role in preventing and slowing cancer. Lycopene gives many vegetables their red color and it's found in tomatoes, carrots, red cabbage, watermelon.

Lutein is another antioxidant that's known to protect the eyes, skin and heart. It's found in dark leafy greens and in yellow plants, including kale, broccoli, oranges and papaya.

Flavonoids or bioflavonoids can regulate cell signaling and have antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer properties. In general, the more colorful the plant food, the higher it is in bioflavonoids.

My dogs love eating fruits and veggies and I like giving them for the above reasons. And to get the most out of their fruits and vegetables, I suggest you either run them through a juicer or mulcher or lightly steam them first. Fruits and veggies can be pricey, so help your dog get the most out of them. And always buy organic if you can afford it.

Rule #6: Keep It Starch-Free

Starchy foods like grains, peas and potatoes aren't suitable for your dog (or for you for that matter). Dogs do have the ability to digest some grain content and it might not be too harmful to include a small amount of grains in training treats ... but try as much as possible to limit their use.

Starchy foods cause your dog to continually produce a hormone called insulin. This causes him to store a lot of his food as fat, so if your dog is on the chubby side, avoiding grains will help. This can also lead to insulin resistance and diabetes.

Don't overlook the importance of cutting that starch out of your dog's life ... this is the main reason people see so many healthy changes when they switch their dog to a raw diet.

But the biggest reason to ditch the starch is because it only adds calories to your dog's diet. While your dog would die without protein or fat, he has no need for starch (or carbohydrate). And eating too much can start to disrupt the delicate colonies of microbes that live in his digestive tract. These little bugs make up most of your dog's immune

system and even help him produce vitamins ... and when they're disrupted, your dog can suffer from allergies, yeast and inflammatory health issues.

In a nutshell, if your dog doesn't need them, why would you feed them? There's no benefit to starch and the risks outweigh the benefits (and the only benefit to starch is it keeps costs down for you ... they add no benefit to your dog whatsoever).

Most of the healthy benefits of the raw diet aren't necessarily because it's raw ... it's because every other diet is high in starch! Don't overlook the importance of cutting that starch out of your dog's life ... this is the main reason people see so many healthy changes when they switch their dog to a raw diet.

Rule #7: Variety Counts

Just like us, dogs need a variety of wholesome foods to provide them with a wide range of nutrients ... not to mention the fact that it's boring to eat the same foods every day!

Feed a wide variety of different foods, including different sources of meat. Don't forget to feed some of the "weird and icky things" such as chicken, duck or turkey feet, beef trachea, tails, lung, testicles and pizzles. Parts like beef trachea and poultry feet are loaded with natural chondroitin and glucosamine, which help to build healthy joints and they're reasonably priced. Adding the icky parts is a win-win.

Rule #8: Balance over Time

One common concern with raw feeding is that it's not "complete and balanced." This isn't true for two reasons.

First, nobody knows what complete and balanced is, so it's difficult to make this claim.

Second, balance can occur over time ... every meal doesn't need to be completely balanced. As long as your dog's nutritional needs are met over the course of a few days or weeks, you're good.

You don't calculate the exact percentages of protein and carbohydrates or the exact amount of vitamins and minerals in each of your family's meals. You don't have to do it with your dog's meals either. So, you don't have to follow these rules for every meal.

Let me show you what I fed my dogs this week to give you an idea of balance over time.

Real Life Raw Meal Examples

Here's what my dogs ate this week ...

Monday: Big veal tails

Tuesday am: Beef (95% lean) mixed with 50% organ meats (containing brain, lung, spleen, kidney, reproductive organs, liver, pancreas and some green tripe) and 5% fruit and veggie mix

Tuesday pm: Beef (95% lean) mixed with 50% organ meats

Wednesday am: Lamb ribs

Wednesday pm: Beef (95% lean) mixed with 50% organ meats and 5% fruits and veggies

Thursday am: Whole mackerel

Thursday pm: Ground goat with 40% organ meats and 5% fruits and veggies

Friday: Whole rabbit

Saturday am: Lamb ribs

Saturday pm: Ground goat with 40% organ meats and 5% fruits and veggies

Sunday am: Beef neck bone

Sunday pm: Fruit and veggies

You probably noticed that some days I didn't feed very balanced meals. And that's OK! At the end of the week, my dogs will have averaged out to about 12% bone and 30% organ meat. That's balance over time!

As a side note, I don't feed poultry to my dogs. The reason I don't is an advanced idea that will get in your way of learning. If you're starting out, poultry is just fine ... but once you get the hang of raw feeding, and if you can afford to, you might want to reduce the amount of poultry in your dog's diet. But for now, it's just fine.

Rule #9: Feed Fish Once A Week

Although a lot of raw feeders do, I never give my dogs fish oil. It can easily turn rancid (even high quality oil) and cause inflammation in your dog. It's not environmentally friendly and it's a heated, processed product. I feed my dogs to avoid the unhealthy consequences of heating and processing. And I don't want to undo all that hard work and extra expense by slathering fish oil all over my dogs' meals. And if you're feeding poultry, your dog's diet will be much too high in polyunsaturated fats if you add fish oil.

Instead of fish oil, you can feed whole fish (like sardines, smelts, herring, and mackerel) once or twice a week. Or you can add a little fish to several meals. At the end of the week, you'll want whole fish to be about 5% of your dog's total diet. This will balance out his fats.

Rule # 10: Relax

If you follow rules 1 through 9, you'll be feeding your dog a fresh, whole food diet that's safe and balanced. It really is that easy to feed raw. The only step left is to start doing it! But before you do, here are just a couple of things to keep in mind ...

When To Feed

Most people feed their dogs twice per day. I feed once a day, twice a day and some days not at all.

I like to fast my dogs once every week or two because most immune function is in the gut. If the dog's digestive system is continually digesting meals, there's no time for house cleaning. The dog's immune system will suffer. Once a week, I turn my dogs out with a nice beef neck bone to chew. Or I'll give them some fruit and that's their fast day. The exception is puppies under six months of age who eat three times a day in my house.

How Much To Feed

As a starting point, feed your dog about two to three percent of his ideal adult weight. So, if he weighs 50 pounds, feed him one pound of food or a bit more.

If your dog is very active, you may need to feed a little more and if your dog is more of a couch potato, you may need to feed a little less.

The best way to tell if you're feeding the right amount is to run your hands over your dog's ribs. If you can feel the ribs, but not see them, your dog is at a good weight.

Puppies need more calories and nutrition ... so they should also receive about two to three percent of their ideal **adult** weight. When puppies are four to six months old, they will need a lot of food and a good amount of calcium because they're building their adult teeth. If

they don't get enough calcium in their diet at this critical stage, they'll pull the calcium from their bones and either develop bone or dental deformities. So, throw a few extra bones at your puppies at this age, just for a little extra insurance.

So, there you have it! Overall, raw feeding is quite easy and you only need to follow those simple rules to be safe and successful.

With time, you will become more comfortable with your dog's new diet and you will start to see the results in the form of better coats, cleaner teeth, fresher breath and fewer health issues.

Good luck with your dog's diet. Feel confident that when you feed your last bag of kibble, you'll be joining the ranks of thousands of people who have safely and effectively made the jump to raw feeding and have never looked back!