

Feeding Dogs: eat simply, live well

on feeding dogs a great, nature-inspired diet

by Dr. Christine King

Can you imagine if going to the grocery store to shop for yourself and your family was just a matter of going to the human food aisle and selecting from the range of different flavors of dry or canned food? (Come to think of it, I have stood behind people in the checkout line whose carts were piled high with boxes and bags and cans of processed foods for themselves, with nothing fresh or unprocessed in their carts at all...)

Even if such foods were "nutritionally complete and balanced" (as is the absurd claim on most dry and canned pet foods), do you really think that you could stay healthy for life on such a diet, processed to have a shelf-life of months or years, never eating any fresh foods whatsoever? Certainly, one can survive on such a diet, but thrive? No.

Then, what on earth makes us think that dogs and cats can?!

The simple truth is that most can't. (I say "most" because you will come across the occasional animal who, despite such an unwholesome diet, seems to do OK. In my opinion, these unusual individuals represent a triumph of good genes over bad diet. Or they just haven't lived long enough yet...)

The problem is that the consequences of an unwholesome diet often are insidious. We're used to thinking that such common maladies as arthritis, heart disease, kidney disease, tooth and gum disease, cataracts, senility, and cancer are the result of aging. We've been led to believe that bodies become diseased as they age, and that this decline in health is inevitable; it's not a matter of if, but when, and what, and where.

While this outcome is an all-too-common fate these days, the truth is that most of these problems can be prevented, or at the very least delayed or reduced in at-risk individuals, simply by feeding a wholesome diet. The saying "we are what we eat" is quite literally true, as what we eat goes into the maintenance and repair of all our tissues and organs.

Scads of books and articles have already been written about feeding dogs. Some are even quite good. And yet myths and misconceptions about how to feed dogs abound. Perhaps the most pernicious is that it is beyond the average person to do it well.

Let me disabuse you of that notion right now. Feeding dogs well is not rocket science. If it were, then dogs probably would have died out long before. You don't need a degree in dietetics and nutrition to feed yourself and your family well. The same is true about feeding your dog. You simply need to understand a few principles, and go from there.

I thought what might be most useful here is for me to tell you how I feed my own dog, the splendid Miss Tiger Lilly, a bitza* of indeterminate age and heritage whom I love with all my heart and aspire to keep healthy and happy for life. (*Bitza: a mixed-breed dog...made up of bitza this & bitza that.)

Lessons from Miss Tiger Lilly

I can be pretty lazy, so if I could, I'd probably still be feeding Miss Lilly dry food. Fortunately for my edification and for yours, her body won't tolerate it. Not even the "all natural" and "organic" varieties. (And by the way, there's nothing natural nor organic about kibble. Where in nature does such a thing exist?)

On such a diet, Lilly quickly develops the same symptoms she arrived with: diarrhea, vomiting, gurgly tummy, foul-smelling gas, bad breath, mucky teeth and gums, itchy skin, infected ears, low energy, and a "dog smell." (It may surprise you to learn that healthy dogs don't smell "doggy.")

Long story short, I've tried many different commercial dry, canned, and even raw dog foods. What Miss Lilly does the very best on is a home-made diet of freshly prepared foods, mostly raw but some lightly cooked, with lots of variety. (Funny, that's also true for me.)

Here are the elements that I think are most important:

1. Dogs are carnivores, although they're not as strict about it as some other species, such as cats. I feed Miss Lilly a diet of meat and veggies that is about 60% meat and 40% veg. I don't feel constrained by that ratio for every meal, however. Most of her meals are a blend of meat and veg, in that approximate ratio, but there are times when a meal is just meaty bones; no veg. Other times dinner may be some lentil soup I've made for my vegetarian self; no meat. But overall, Lilly is getting the bulk of her calories, protein, and other primary nutrients from animal sources, as is appropriate for her species.

(For ethical and environmental reasons, I'd dearly love to keep the meat portion of her diet down below 50%. I'm playing with that currently, although I remain very aware that she is a carnivore, both physiologically and psychologically, and I should continue to feed her as such. I'm simply trying to find a healthy balance between minimizing my use of farmed animal products and maintaining a healthy, happy dog. Stay tuned.)

Note that there are no grains or grain-based foods in Miss Lilly's diet. Some dogs do OK with a little grain in their diet. Lilly does not. So, while she can now tolerate the occasional dog cookie (thank you, UPS guy) and discarded hamburger bun by the side of the road (like manna from heaven!), she does best when I do not include any grains in her daily diet. That, too, is species-appropriate. Grain is for mice and canaries.

Dogs are designed to get most of their calories from animal proteins and fats, and relatively little from carbohydrates. (By the way, that is the opposite of how most commercial dog foods are formulated. Carbs are cheap; animal proteins are expensive.)

I buy mostly lean meats because Lilly is currently a suburban dog. Were she to be a working dog or an athlete, she would need more calories for work than lean meats could provide. But by feeding mostly lean meats, she is well able to meet her calorie needs without getting overweight with our current lifestyle.

2. The more variety, the better and the easier it is for a body to meet all of its nutritional needs. True for us, and true for dogs. I try to buy as much variety of animal source foods as I can, while still keeping within my budget. Depending on what looks good and fits in the budget that week, Lilly's diet variously includes poultry (chicken, turkey, duck, quail), mammals (beef, lamb, venison, pork, rabbit), fish (either fresh or frozen fish as well as tinned sardines and kippers), and eggs.

The more variety I can keep in her diet, the better she does, and the fewer problems I have with foods she has had trouble with in the past (e.g. lamb and pork). When fed occasionally and in small quantities, these previously off-limits foods are now well tolerated and much enjoyed by her. Same goes for dairy products.

For awhile I was making up a week's worth of food at a time for her. Half went in the fridge and the other half went in the freezer for later in the week. When I was doing that, I made sure to include as many different beasts in the pot as I could that week.

But Lilly does best, and enjoys her food most, when I prepare her meals daily, as I do for myself. When I do this, I generally use just one animal-source food at a time, but feed something different every day, thus giving her lots of variety over the course of the week.

(By the way, I used to think that I was too busy to do that. Actually, I was just too lazy to make eating well - for myself and for my dog - the priority that it needs to be if we want to stay healthy for life. It seems ridiculous now that I felt I was too busy to feed myself properly. How on earth did I think I could sustain that?!)

The same principle of including lots of variety also applies to the veggies. I mostly stick with leafy greens (lots of options there), carrots, zucchini, and other relatively low-starch veggies that will mix up well in my blender. The point of including veggies in the dog's diet is that they are an excellent source of highly bioavailable vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids, enzymes, antioxidants, healthy microbes, and other beneficial cofactors. (Were she to be catching her own food and eating the entire animal, Lilly would be getting these other nutrients from her prey.)

Miss Lilly loves her meat and doesn't care for veggies, so I have to "meat up" her veggies, just like mothers of little kids may need to hide the broccoli in the pizza sauce. Most times I whizz up the raw veggies in the blender, add some tasty herbs & spices, and then mix it in well with the meat. If I'm feeding her fish or other meat that I want to cook, I'll lightly steam the veggies with the meat to flavor the veggies with the meat. (By the way, steaming some white fish with some shredded cabbage and grated carrot is a marvelous meal for a dog with a digestive upset.)

3. Dogs are designed to eat their prey raw. Since switching to mostly raw foods myself a couple of years ago, I've noticed how well nourished and light I feel eating mostly fresh, minimally processed foods. Miss Lilly likewise seems very well nourished on her fresh-food diet. She is now at least 9 years of age, but she looks and acts like a much younger dog, and she has none of the complaints that so often appear in dogs of her age.

I feed Lilly mostly raw foods, but I do feed her some lightly cooked foods as well. Some heat-sensitive nutrients are lost by even light cooking. And the essential vitality of raw food is lost in its cooking. By

the same token, lightly cooking veggies can improve the digestibility of other nutrients, which may be especially important in carnivores, whose digestive systems are adapted to eating herbivores rather than eating like them. Through trial and error, I have found that Lilly does best on a mostly but not exclusively raw food diet. (Me too, as it happens.)

By the way, I have yet to have any serious problems feeding Miss Lilly raw meat and bones. Lilly is a dog; her system is designed to eat raw foods, even foods with high bacterial loads. In fact, sometimes she will bury her bones and will dig them up and eat them only weeks later, once they are really ripe. That, too, is species-appropriate. In my practice, the only times I've encountered serious problems with raw feeding of dogs and cats were when the patient was unhealthy and seriously lacking in vitality. In these patients, we start slowly, making dietary changes gradually, and emphasizing lightly cooked fresh foods until the system is stronger. (Sometimes I'll also recommend digestive enzymes and/or probiotics during the dietary transition.)

4. Dogs eat most, if not all, of the carcass of their prey, including the organs, skin, and bones.

In contrast, most of the meats available for humans are just muscle tissue. When I shop for Miss Lilly, I try to include as much organ meat as I can (liver, heart, kidney, etc.), although often it's impossible for me to find a good range of organs for her.

I also make sure I buy raw bones for her. A home-made diet that is based on muscle and organ meats will be grossly deficient in calcium unless a source of calcium is added. The most biologically appropriate source of calcium for a carnivore is raw bone. Other options include bone meal powder and human calcium supplements. My preference is to feed raw, meaty bones a few times a week. Not only does this strategy allow Lilly to meet her calcium needs in a species-appropriate way, it keeps her teeth and gums healthy and it satisfies her primal need to gnaw on her prey.

Another important addition when home-preparing food for dogs is a source of essential fatty acids, particularly the omega-3 fatty acids (Ω -3 FAs). These essential nutrients often are lacking in farmed animals these days, and they are found in the highest concentrations in tissues that are not widely available in grocery stores, such as the eyeballs and the brain and spinal cord.

Sardines and other small fish are rich in Ω -3 FAs. So, too, are the nutritional algae such as chlorella, spirulina, and AFA algae. (In fact, algae are the source of the essential fatty acids found in fish.) I feed Lilly sardines or kippers a couple of times a week, as well as a herbal vitamin and trace mineral supplement (*Vitality Canid*) that contains chlorella.

5. A healthy body maintains a healthy appetite and a healthy weight on a healthy diet.

As long as the diet meets all of the dog's nutritional needs, including vitamins and minerals, she is unlikely to overeat to any great extent. Just as we do, dogs will overeat really tasty foods. But for the most part, overeating is the body's way of trying to get all that it needs from a diet that oversupplies calories and undersupplies vitamins, minerals, and other "lesser" nutrients.

The body's first priority when eating is to meet its calorie and protein needs. It will continue eating beyond the point of meeting those needs if, in the process, it has not also met its needs for vitamins and minerals, including the oh-so-important trace minerals. So, in addition to feeding a wide variety

of fresh, wholesome foods, I do use a vitamin-mineral supplement as a bit of extra insurance. (I use *Vitality Canid.*)

I'm often asked by folks just starting out with home preparing how much food they should give their dog. I generally advise to feed according to the dog's appetite and body condition, watching closely at first to ensure that the dog isn't gorging on this new and hopefully more tasty and interesting diet (as gorging may cause vomiting), and anticipating that the dog's appetite will decrease a little after a few weeks. (It's been my observation that a chronically depleted body will overeat this more nutritious diet until it feels replete, and then the appetite levels out.)

As a reference point, Miss Lilly weighs about 50 lbs and eats in the range of 3-4 cups of fresh (i.e. high water content) foods per day, divided between a smaller breakfast and a larger dinner. (The reason I do it that way is because I want her sacked out, digesting of an evening while I'm on the sofa doing the same.) In the wintertime, she often wants (and needs) more; in the summertime, less. So, I adjust the quantities accordingly.

Oh, and while on the subject of appetite, I've noticed how much Lilly enjoys the various culinary herbs and spices I use in my own food prep. She even likes the spicy curries my Indian friend makes. (Just don't tell Rajani that I share her wonderful food gifts with my dog!) Lilly relishes her food and licks her bowl clean whenever I add herbs and spices. I think it's a wonderful way to keep food interesting and our dogs feeling well nourished and well loved.

There you have it. Hardly rocket science. It just takes adjusting one's thinking, stepping away from what the pet food and veterinary industries have been telling us and selling us for decades, and operating from the foundation of how carnivores are designed to eat. If I've overlooked some important piece or something I've written needs clarification, please let me know so that I can amend this article accordingly. Chances are, you're not the only one who is wondering the same thing. Have fun!

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Feeding dogs is covered in much more detail in my book, *Feeding Miss Lilly—on feeding dogs a great, nature-inspired diet.*