

VETERINARY NURSING JOURNAL

VNJ



The official
journal of
The British
Veterinary
Nursing
Association

December 2006

Vol 21 | No 12



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National VN Day:

VNs spread

The risk of bones

Are you or your clients thinking of giving your dog a bone for Christmas? Hsin-Yi Cohen looks into the pros and cons of this controversial issue



Photo: UK Raw Meaty Bones Support and Action Group.

German Shepherd, Kai enjoying a lamb neck.

bones

"Is it safe for my dog to eat bones?"

"Should I be feeding bones to my dog?"

"My friend says I should feed my dog raw chicken wings – is this OK?"

"I've heard that bones are dangerous because dogs can choke on them – is this true?"

These are all questions that VNs are frequently asked by anxious owners, who are trying to do the best for their pets, but are confused by the sea of conflicting information thrust at them. Certainly the issue of feeding bones is one of the most controversial topics in companion animal care.

There are many pet owners, breeders and even veterinary surgeons who firmly believe in feeding bones to dogs and even cats. Many – such as members of the UK Raw Meaty Bones Support and Action Group – believe that feeding bones, as part of a balanced raw diet, is simply going back to what nature intended. In fact, they claim that a raw diet is superior to processed pet foods and that animals fed a diet of raw meaty bones and other raw foodstuffs enjoy better health, improved teeth and coat, and relief from untreatable allergies and other auto-immune problems. This has caused much controversy in the veterinary professions and industry.

Veterinary stance

Many members of the veterinary community, however, have strong reservations about the wisdom and scientific validity of feeding bones. The British Veterinary Association advises against

feeding bones to dogs, as splinters can lodge in the mouth, throat or chest, or damage the stomach lining and puncture the intestines, causing extensive and sometimes life-threatening internal injuries, as well as having the potential to chip and break teeth (**Table 1**).

Raw meaty bones

According to the bone-feeding enthusiasts, such possibilities are very remote, particularly if dogs are fed raw bones as opposed to cooked ones. They believe it is the cooked bones that are dangerous: brittle and likely to splinter and cause damage. Many raw feeders even base their diets on raw chicken bones.

Australian veterinarian, Dr Ian Billinghurst, is one of the founders of the raw feeding movement and the creator of the BARF diet. In his book, *Give Your Dog A Bone*, Billinghurst explains in detail his suggestions for feeding bones safely.

"There is an incredible difference between cooked and raw chicken. Have you ever tried to chew on raw chicken? It is tough. The bones, on the other hand, coming from young birds, are extremely soft. Once your dog has crunched through that flesh, the bones are safely crushed. Contrast this with cooked chicken: the flesh is beautifully soft, while the bones have gone brittle and sometimes quite splintery. These are dangerous!"

Billinghurst advises that as long as the bones you feed are fresh, raw and soft (having come from young animals), they may be fed with great confidence. For particularly old dogs, young dogs, toothless dogs and dogs who have never eaten bones

before – or if you are really worried about the risks – he thinks meaty bones can be ground up or minced before being fed.

This sentiment is echoed by Dr Tom Lonsdale, another veterinarian in the raw diet movement, who so passionately believes in the benefits of raw meaty bones, he has established the Raw Meaty Bones Lobby to promote their use in diets. While Lonsdale disagrees with Billinghurst on certain aspects (for example, he disagrees with the grinding up of bones), he reiterates that all dogs are able to eat raw meaty bones safely, provided that they have been fed in an appropriate manner, as part of a balanced diet.

In Lonsdale's book, *Raw Meaty Bones*, he believes that most blockages in pet dogs are caused by other foreign objects, with corn cobs, peach stones, tennis ball remnants and even tampons high on the list – as well as other commonly fed items, such as rawhide chews and pigs' ears. A study on foreign bodies in dogs and cats, by Dr Richard Malik at the University of Sydney, stated: "Bones very rarely cause problems once they reach the stomach, although excess ingestion may result in constipation if the dog is not accustomed to eating a bone rich diet."

According to Dr Lonsdale, bones are safe if a dog has to spend a long time chewing and working at the bone in order to "chop it up"; i.e. bones fed should be in a large enough piece that the dog has to do the "processing". Note, however, bones which are too big can also cause trouble – massive cannon bones should be avoided because they are so thick and hard, they can wear down and break teeth.

Nutrition

It cannot be doubted that bones provide a good combination of nutrients: high quality protein, good mineral supplementation (e.g. calcium), essential fatty acids, vitamins A, D and E, iron and copper in the bone marrow, plus all the antioxidants and beneficial enzymes.

Chewing on them is also believed to be a good exercise of muscles and provide psychological benefits – certainly providing a bone to gnaw on has long been a solution to a bored and



Some raw meaty bones advocates believe that this diet encourages good dental health, whilst others think that the risk of broken teeth contraindicates its use.

destructive dog.

On the other hand, commercial processed feeds provide a scientifically-tested, complete, balanced mixture of nutrients in a convenient form – something which home-prepared diets may struggle to achieve. In addition, much of the evidence for bone-based diets is anecdotal, whilst commercial pet food companies spend millions on scientific research and creating diets which are designed to promote health and well-being.

Dental health

For some supporters, the biggest benefit lies in the bones' perceived role as nature's toothbrush. It has been claimed that some processed pet foods may not do enough to encourage the necessary chewing and gnawing required to clean teeth, so food sludge sticks and feeds oral bacteria. Conversely, raw meaty bones require extensive chewing and tearing with the teeth.

Leading dentist to the veterinary profession, John Robinson, has stated, however, that gum disease is prevalent in the wild, and a natural diet does not have a significant impact compared to commercial pet foods: "Indeed, it is very much down to improvements in nutrition that pets are living longer and, therefore, suffering from gum disease in old age." Veterinary professionals also hold concerns with regards to damage to teeth caused by bones.

Decisions

Certainly, it is a subject that has caused much controversy, with two sides to every argument. As members of the veterinary profession, making sure you are aware of all sides of the argument – the benefits, risks and the current veterinary guidance from your associations – means that you can help to inform your interested clients.

References

- Billinghurst, I. (2001) *The BARF Diet*. Ian Billinghurst.
- Billinghurst, I. (1993) *Give Your Dog A Bone*. Ian Billinghurst.
- Lonsdale, T. (2001) *Raw Meaty Bones: Promote Health*. Rivetco Pty.
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- www.rawmeatybones.com
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Table 1. British Veterinary Association guidance.

Key facts:

- Commercially-prepared pet foods have been scientifically formulated to contain the optimum balance of essential dietary nutrients for each species. Some commercial pet foods have been designed to satisfy the requirements of certain types of dog or their different activities or the specialised dietary needs of animals with a range of illnesses. The use of such diets over the past decades likely accounts for the increased health and longevity of companion animals.
- These commercial diets are based on extensive research, performed both "in-house" and in collaboration with veterinary schools. Much of this research is published in the peer-reviewed scientific literature. By contrast, there is no scientific evidence base to support the benefits of just feeding raw meat and bones.
- Dogs and cats may be fed with home-prepared "natural diets", but it is very important to achieve the optimum balance of requisite nutrients in this fashion.
- The feeding of raw meat and bones, especially small cooked sharp or splintered bones, to companion animals carries particular risks. This includes infection with pathogenic bacteria associated with uncooked meats (e.g. Salmonella, Campylobacter) and injury (e.g. intestinal perforation) caused by bone fragments. The BSAVA (the BVA's relevant specialist division) advises against the feeding of raw meat or bones to companion animals for this reason.
- The Raw Meaty Bones lobby proposes that the feeding of bones is beneficial to oral health (teeth and gums). Although providing large raw marrow bones may be beneficial as something to chew, similar benefits may be achieved by feeding of purpose designed kibble food or dental chews, without the attendant risk of damage (e.g. fractures) of the teeth.