

Transitioning Your Cats to a Balanced, Raw Food Diet: A Special Interview with Tracy Dion

By Dr. Karen Becker

KB: Dr. Karen Becker

TD: Tracy Dion

KB: Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker. Celebrating next with me is Tracy Dion. Thank you, Tracy, for joining me. I, of course, know exactly who you are, but for our listeners or readers who don't know, tell us a little bit about yourself.

TD: First, thank you so much, Dr. Becker, for this great opportunity to be here with you to talk to so many cat owners. My name is Tracy Dion. I'm 52, a veteran, a grandmother to two lovely little granddaughters. Probably like everybody watching, I've adored cats all my life. When I was young, I worked heavily in rescue with all kinds of pets – cats, dogs, birds, reptiles and rabbits. It really didn't matter. But about two decades ago, I narrowed my focus to just cats.

In 2007, I began helping owners who had behavior and nutrition questions on online forums. In 2011, I founded the educational website, CatCentric.org, and shortly thereafter, the CatCentric Facebook group, which now hosts over 11,000 members. I write for a variety of magazines and spend several hours a week helping cat owners. It's one of the most satisfying parts of my life.

KB: That's so wonderful, Tracy. We met virtually because you are that beautiful soul that when people first hear something and they're overwhelmed or they're up to that edge and they feel like, "You know what? I'm a terrible cat owner. I can't do this. I feel overwhelmed or afraid," you jump in there and you just do such a beautiful job of step-by-step coaching people through those tough spots. The services that you are providing, both via your website and on social media, are really invaluable. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

TD: Thank you.

KB: One of the questions I had for Tracy – I emailed her and I said, "Tracy, I'm doing Cat Week." My thought was, "What is the topic that's near and dear to all of my guests' hearts? What's the topic that you want to cover?" When I emailed you, you actually had a pretty quick response. What is the topic you think would most benefit pet owners to discuss today?

TD: I'm going to start with one of my absolute favorite topics. That's feline nutrition, specifically feeding a fresh diet. Proper nutrition is the foundation of health. It affects every aspect of a cat's life, even behavior. Feeding a balanced fresh food diet is one of the most critical and beneficial choices we will ever make for our cats.

There are several ways that we can source and feed fresh. Each has its own drawbacks and benefits. Most convenient is probably just purchasing commercial raw food. There are quite a few on the market today. Rad Cat is my favorite. More are becoming available all the time. I just

ask everybody to pay attention to the ingredients. You don't want fruits and vegetables to be a large percentage of the product. Sometimes with commercial products, that does happen.

Commercial is easy to source and feed, but it can be a bit pricey. It's easy in part because it's a completely ground product. You can make your own ground product meals at home using one of the few tried and tested recipes. I often recommend yours, Dr. Becker, from your book, *Dr. Becker's Real Food for Healthy Dogs and Cats: Simple Homemade Food*.

KB: Nice. A little plug there.

TD: You can see I have all my little pages marked.

KB: Tabs, yeah, which is good. Yeah, exactly. Give us some ideas out of your list of recommendations. Where does one start within that list? Because it can be overwhelming.

TD: Start easy. Start small. Most people start by making raw food for themselves or making the chicken dinner or something. They just give the cats a piece of their meat. Really, it doesn't have to be long drawn out. It doesn't have to be a stressful thing. Just start small.

KB: Yup.

TD: Just start like that.

KB: What if you get the question I always get? The top questions I get are, "Well, my cat doesn't like it." What do you do when people say, "My cat's not interested in switching her diet"?

TD: All cats can be transitioned, at least in my experience. All cats can be transitioned to a healthier diet. Some of them just take longer than others. Some of them just need a different approach. There are all kinds of different tips and tricks you can use.

On my website, I have an article that has a really comprehensive list of every tip and trick I've ever heard of. But my favorite is a really low-stress, easy method. Just take a pea-sized bit of whatever it is that you want to feed. It can be prey model raw (PMR), whole prey or the ground. Put it on your cat's plate, next to its regular food, and then walk away. If he eats it, great. If he doesn't, that's okay too. Just throw it away. Just keep doing this every meal, every single day.

What you're basically doing is you're helping your cat understand that that strange-looking, smelly little bit is actually food. Eventually, the cat will try it. And then you just put down a couple of pieces, and then you put down three pieces, and then you slowly reduce the commercial product and increase the raw product until he's eating raw.

KB: Tracy, do you advocate – Let's say that this concept of feeding fresh foods is brand new, do you first suggest people try and wean onto canned food or no? You just tell people try raw right off the bat?

TD: The very first thing I tell them to do is to get their cats off of kibble and off of free-feeding. Free-feeding is an unhealthy practice to begin with. If a cat has food available all the time, they just don't have a whole lot of incentive to try anything new. I recommend getting onto timed meals, three a day, at least four a day if you can manage it. That's the very first step.

The second step is they have to research all of the different ways to feed raw. There's the commercial ground. There's homemade ground. Another recipe you could try besides what's in this book here is online. Dr. Lisa Pierson's CatInfo.org has a great ground recipe. You can also try the prey model raw type of diet. You can even do a whole prey. Pick which one fits your lifestyle and your resources, and then try to transition the cat to that.

Only if that doesn't work, then take a step back and maybe transition them from kibble to canned, or kibble to ground, and then to PMR or whole prey or whatever your eventual diet is.

KB: Yeah. Back up and tell listeners and readers how you discovered fresh feeding for cats. It typically goes down to either one of two ways, either you had a cat that was sick or had a health crisis, or you had a kitty that got sick and/or died and you're like, "You know what, I'm not doing that again." Usually, it's from heartaches in some way, shape or form.

TD: That's the saddest thing. That is the most heartbreaking statistic, but you're absolutely right. It happened to me.

Back in 2006, I pulled a litter of feral kittens off the streets. All four of them were sick. Into the 2007 pet food poisoning, one of them actually died. I've already done some research at the time. Unprocessed cat food products and taking my cats off of kibble. They were only eating canned. But after Ollie died. I really started digging into it. I really started trying to get familiar with the regulations around it, or, more accurately, the lack thereof, and with the pet food industry's processing methods and ingredients.

KB: Yeah. That is a heartbreaking reality or eye-opening experience to the pet food industry. It's when you have a pet become sick, ill or die, it's devastating. But also, the trust is gone, but this overwhelming feeling of "What do I do now?" is very apparent.

TD: Yes.

KB: A lot of people, in addition to coping with a very ill cat, they're in the process of saying, "Okay. I saw what I did wrong to create this. What do I do to get out of it?" That can be incredibly overwhelming. What about cooked foods? Some people say, "Does it have to be raw?" What about cooking food?

TD: Cooking does destroy some of the nutrition in the product, but there are supplements out there that you can add back in. The more you cook it, the more you process it in any way, the more nutrition gets damaged, the more you have to supplement, the further away from fresh you get. But it's a great way to make a transition.

You can start by lightly searing kidney or liver. If the cat's like, "Oh, I'm not touching that," you can lightly sear the outside of it. That may help him to start eating it. I mean, as time goes by, just cook it less and less.

KB: Yup. That's a great strategy. What about people who say, "You know what, I can't get my brain around a ground product. I can't get my cat interested in eating bony foods"? In fact, I had a kitty that took forever to want to actually crunch up bone. He was just grossed out by it. He eventually did it, but it took him a good year. Do you have many people coming to you and saying, "Hey, my cat's not interested in crunching anything"?

TD: I do have a lot of people saying that. Sometimes I think it's the owner who's a little bit more scared than the cat. But cats can be transitioned onto bone, you just have to start very slowly and, really, you have to use the appropriate-sized bone. I see a lot of people trying to feed their cats chicken thighs, the bones out of chicken thighs, the third joint of the chicken wing or something like that. That's too thick. A lot of chicken legs even. It's just too thick to be asking our cats to eat.

You take a look at their natural prey. We're talking mice, rats and birds. Those have really tiny, easy-to-break bones. I mean you can break them with your bare hands. That's how tiny they are. The first step, of course, is to make sure you're not trying to give the cats something they shouldn't be eating in the first place. Make it nice and small.

KB: Yup. Brilliant advice, really good advice. We're not trying to – We're not going to offer femur bones, which a lot of people do for their dogs. But I've had that happen. People offer those to their kitties, and it's like that's not an appropriate-sized bone for a cat. That happens.

TD: Yes. Even [though] some cats can do it, it's just not right to ask them to do it.

KB: Exactly. That's exactly right.

TD: If you can't break it with your bare hands, don't feed it to your cat.

KB: Yeah. That's actually a really great suggestion.

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Tracy, there's a lot of different types of fresh feeding. There's a lot of different theories out there. That can be overwhelming. Cover some of the basic types. If people are going to dive in and learn more about fresh feeding, what are some of the ways or types of feeding that they're going to encounter, and what [do they] mean?

TD: Okay. We already covered commercial, which is typically a ground product. Commercial is easy to source and feed, but it can be a bit pricey. It's easy in part because it's a completely ground product, and I mentioned this already. You can make your own ground meals at home using one of the few tried-and-tested recipes. I often recommend yours, Dr. Becker, from your book, *Real Food for Healthy Dogs and Cats*.

KB: Thank you.

TD: As well as Dr. Lisa Pierson's recipe from her website, CatInfo.org. You'd want to be careful if you're going to use an online recipe, that it is a tried and tested one and comes from a resource that you can trust.

The benefit to sourcing and grinding the ingredients yourself is two-fold. You can save on cost of the commercial ground. And because you buy the ingredients yourself, you can control the quality of the foods your cats are eating, as well as tweak it if your cat has an allergy or a sensitivity to one protein or another, or has an issue, if he has advanced kidney disease and he needs his phosphorus levels adjusted a bit.

The next fresh food option is PMR, prey model raw. Using this method, you can purchase muscle meats, organs and bone and meats, like chicken ribs, and feed them on a schedule, so at the end of a given time period, which is typically a week, your cat will have eaten 83 percent muscle meat, 7 percent bone and 10 percent organ, with half of that being liver. This guideline, 83-7-10 is modeled after the average percentages in the cat's natural diet of small rodents and birds. It differs from the canine guidelines in that it requires a slightly lower bone content.

PMR is definitely the least expensive raw feeding option. It's also the most time-consuming. You have to cut through meals and portion sizes. You have to ensure your cats eat everything offered to maintain the proper nutrient balance. If they stop eating the bone in meals or they start refusing the organs, you have to either entice them to eat that or you have to switch over to whole prey, a ground diet or even back to canned. You want to make sure that they're getting the proper balanced diet.

The final fresh food option is simply feeding whole prey, such as mice, rats, quail, etc. I know this one's a little difficult for people, but it is, by far, the easiest option. It's how I feed my cats today. You do just want to buy the frozen prey in portioned sizes, thaw it and serve. There's no prepping. There's no packing. Best of all, there's no waste. It's my favorite way to feed a cat.

KB: You bring up a great point. I call those feeders hardcore raw feeders, because – and I have a lot of them in my practice – they typically become farmers of small mammals. They're farming mice, voles, moles and small rabbits. They're growing prey food for their cats. That is, hands down, how you know for sure exactly what your cats are eating. Like you said, it makes it very, very easy.

In my opinion, that takes an extra commitment to be able to do that, to make the mental and sometimes physical leap, depending on how much space you have. But that is the way, of course, cats evolved to eat. If you can make that leap, you're 100 percent great in doing it.

The one thing I will tell you is parasites are located in the GI tracts of prey. My kitties also will go outside – they find mice inside my house too, but they'll go outside and find mice. All of this consumption of GI tracts means the potential for non-life-threatening parasites is there. It's not a big deal, but once or twice a year, if your cat is consuming anything with GI tract in it, you'd want to make sure you're checking a poo sample to make sure that there are no parasites being

passed up the food chain. If you're buying whole prey, most farmed whole prey have been checked to make sure that they're parasite-free.

TD: Yes.

KB: If you're out hunting baby rabbits for your cats, those wild animals all contain parasites. You'd want to make sure that you are doing your due diligence and removing GI tracts.

TD: Yes.

KB: That's my spiel on parasites. Are you ordering whole prey from a variety of different producers or are you growing it yourself?

TD: I do.

KB: Okay.

TD: I don't have the time. My focus is on helping people, so time is my tightest resource. I have no time to be raising mice or rats, or else hunting them. I order it. It comes to me in a great, big box. I have a chest freezer that's dedicated just for the cats. I just drop them right there.

KB: Yup.

TD: When I need the food, I put it in some warm water and thaw it out, and then put it on their plates – one, two, three, four, five, six – and I'm done.

KB: Are there any parts, Tracy, that certain kitties don't want to eat? At my house, my kitties will not eat tails. They're out on tails.

TD: I have one or two cats that will sometimes leave the tail behind, but I have two other cats that are scavengers. They check everybody. I feed mine in cages so that they don't drive the food around the house. When I release everybody, the scavengers will go and check all the cages. So, no, there's never anything left behind.

KB: But I bet some kitties get two tails a meal, I bet.

TD: Yeah.

KB: That's good.

TD: And quail. I actually started snipping the wings off the quail because there's just so much feather on the wings. A lot of times, they'll leave the wings or they'll leave a ton of feathers in the cage, and then I've got all of that to clean up. I just snip the wings off.

KB: Yeah. One thing that I will just mention too, if the thought of this is overwhelming to you, one thing I will mention is that more and more feline behaviorists, Tracy, veterinary behaviorists,

are advocating whole food not because of sound nutrition, but because it's such an emotionally and mentally enjoyable experience.

If you have a cat that is neurotic, depressed, sad, bipolar, [or has] passive-aggressive issues, all of those things can be improved by really fun feeding time, which involves offering them whole prey that they would be able to do what they would do in the wild, which is eat it how they want and in a form that's very, very natural to them. How long did it take for your kitties to wean on to whole prey?

TD: That took a little bit of time. A couple of them picked up on it right away. The kitty that's back here behind me, Ralph, he was the one that took the longest. He was like, "Yeah, I'm not really sure I want to do this." I think it took him about 28 days exactly. Twenty-eight days to get them all on there.

KB: Wow. That's fast. Wow.

TD: Yes. Most of them just really liked it. I want to say that I love that you brought up the mental aspect of this. It absolutely matters. I have a friend who has a cat who is easily agitated. He gets angry very quickly. They started feeding him whole prey, but not the portion-sized whole prey. They started feeding him larger whole preys. It actually takes him two to three meals. Believe it or not, it has had a great impact on his behavior. He's a lot calmer when he spends 10 to 15 minutes working on this rabbit to break it down and eat it. It does matter.

KB: Yeah. It's interesting. Zoos have known this for a long time. That if cats can't go through the act of hunting, a part of their soul becomes disrupted. They need to stalk. They need to obsess. They need to focus. They need to pounce. They need to shred. They need to use their claws. Those are all things that cats can do when you're offering them their evolutionary food source. It's helping owners get over the mental hump of offering their evolutionary food source, because feeding something with the head on it is difficult.

TD: Little [inaudible 17:31]. Absolutely.

KB: Yes. It makes it hard. But if you have a kitty with a behavior problem, that actually is something that more and more behaviorists are recommending that I could not agree with more. You see tremendous improvement with behavior issues, especially unsolvable behavior issues. Try offering whole prey. It's a really nice behavior modifier that just kind of follows a cat's natural physiology.

Alright. The one, of course, that is up there on the list as well is, "Well, Dr. Becker, you're the only veterinarian recommending this very strange way of feeding." You've got thousands and thousands and thousands of people, both on your website and your social media platforms. That has to be a recurrent theme. "My veterinarian doesn't understand why I want to do this." How do you help people get over the veterinary issue?

TD: That's a sticky one and a difficult one, because a lot of people do want to trust their vets. The vets are getting pressure from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), from

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and all the other organizations saying, “Oh my God. It’s scary. It’s dangerous. Don’t do it.” They’re getting that.

Vets also see the worst of the raw feeding. They’re seeing all of these people who are feeding just meat, and then the cats are very ill. Their bones are starting to snap and get brittle because they’re not getting the calcium that they need, or they’re not getting the organs that they need. They’re feeding an unbalanced diet. The vets see that.

I do have to tell people that if your vet’s giving you pushback, just don’t tell him what you’re feeding. Really, that’s what I tell them. Try to find a vet who will work with you, will understand what it is you’re doing, or will at least respect your choice.

KB: Yeah.

TD: My veterinarian, when I first started, when I first switched my cat, he was like, “You’re kidding, right?” I said, “Nope. I’ve done the research.” Actually, way back when I first switched, there was almost nothing out there. There was Dr. Pierson’s website. Pretty much, that was it. I dug into it, researched it and talked to people for two years before I made the leap. That’s why I built CatCentric.org, so people could have all that information right there, and it wouldn’t have to take all that time.

But when I first made the switch, he was resistant, and then he saw the cats and he saw the change in their behavior. They were all calmer. They were all friendlier. They were all more confident. [He saw] the change in their body condition. He said that they were the friendliest and best-looking clowder he had ever seen. He was so impressed that he was actually letting me put material in his waiting room, on his coffee table.

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KB: Wow. That’s a very progressive vet. What I have found is that many veterinarians are – We’re not taught about raw foods in veterinary school. The hesitation is that they don’t know anything about it. What comes out of that is – Actually, you bring up a great point. A lot of vets don’t even necessarily ask what you’re feeding your cats, which is devastating, but that’s, oftentimes in veterinary medicine, where we’re at. You can go in for an annual exam several years in a row and the vet doesn’t even ask what you’re feeding.

I do recommend that you’re honest with your veterinarian, but that oftentimes brings up the conversation of you having to prompt your veterinarian. What’s your issue with raw food? Most certainly, the unbalanced part of it, all veterinarians do not advocate feeding an unbalanced raw food diet. Nor do I, because of the health issues.

TD: Absolutely.

KB: I mean the nutritional deficiencies manifest quickly – six months – in adult animals. With growing kittens, it manifests in weeks. It’s something that we take very seriously. The next issue can be a health risk per se to owners in the house, because raw meat, just like if you’re cooking raw meat on the grill, you would want to wash those surfaces as not to create an environment

[for] potentially bad pathogenic bacteria in your kitchen. If you are an omnivore by yourself, those raw meats are ready in your home because you're preparing fresh meats probably for your family or your cats at the same time.

Sometimes just by having a conversation with your vet, as you did, you're basically in charge of helping his evolution through educating him, partnering with him, and kind of step-by-step walking him down the path that you took when you transitioned your pets onto fresh food. It's sometimes a growth period for both you and your veterinarian. But asking your veterinarian to partner with you through this, I think, is a really powerful way to teach your veterinarian about fresh foods.

Would you say that the acceptance, Tracy, since you started your platform – I know initially you got the same reaction I did when I started Mercola Healthy Pets nine years ago. “Oh my gosh. Here's a veterinarian recommending raw meat. Does she really have a license? Does she really know what she's doing?” I'm sure that that was it initially, but I bet you're getting less of that now.

TD: Yeah. Absolutely. On the veterinary side, it's very, very slow, but it is beginning to happen. On the consumer side, with the cat owners' side, it's pretty much exploding, which is an awesome thing to see.

In the CatCentric Facebook group, of course, for all about it, people come to that group to get that information. Sometimes I'll go out to these other groups that are on there and I'll just start answering questions for people with urinary tract infections, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), chronic vomiting or diarrhea. They're having a problem and I'll recommend this food. Once upon a time, when I recommended fresh food, the revolt that I would be subject to after posting that was insane. It's just comment after comment just telling me I've lost my mind. But now, there are people who actually agree. People are more willing to think about it. They get the concept a little better today.

KB: It's wonderful. Tracy, some of those conditions are IBD, cystitis and feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD). What are some of the other physical conditions that you've seen fresh food be beneficial for when it comes to felines?

TD: How much time do we have?

KB: Yeah. I mean, probably everything.

TD: It really does. Even if that's their co-condition, it happens very quickly. Whatever diet that you're feeding your cat, it changes the composition of their saliva. It changes the bacteria that's in their digestive tract, and then it goes out from there. It changes just pretty much everything. It makes them feel better so that they're happier. They're friendlier. And of course, they're healthier overall. They have more energy. It's just an amazing transformation.

When I made the change from canned to raw – I have six cats. I'm very lucky. They made the leap, all of them, pretty quickly, right off the bat. I won't go down to all of the details, but it was

faster than I was comfortable with. But they were eating the best canned that was on the market at the time. They were eating a rotation of like, I want to say, 12 different options. They were all the highest quality, like Wellness and Nature's Menu and stuff like that. I did not actually expect to see a whole lot of change when I put them on that. The difference I saw was literally mind-blowing, mostly in their energy level.

KB: Exactly. And then there's this thing that happens that I think, unless you've been through it, it's hard to explain. There is this body composition where they get firmer, their skin turgor's better, the muscle tone improves, they get shinier, the shedding is reduced, but they turn into almost little muscle machines, right? They lose their soft, pudgy appearance. Unless you've been through that, it's hard to explain.

But I would agree with you, having transitioned thousands of kitties from a species-inappropriate diet or biologically-inappropriate diet to a fresh food diet. Everything from heart disease, kidney disease, age-related issues like obesity, stiffness, arthritis, all improved. But I would say IBD.

There is actually a veterinarian in Chicago that will tell people that it's normal for cats to barf, because that's how rampant GI issues are with kitties. Kitties have a lot of inflammatory bowel disease-like symptoms. I think, for me, the most notable improvement is those GI symptoms.

TD: Yes.

KB: Yeah.

TD: You know, when people think of cats and they think about bringing the cat into their home, throwing up hairballs goes along with it. I mean it's part of owning a cat in everybody's mind. That, to me, is heartbreaking, because it is no more natural for a cat to throw up than it is for us to throw up.

KB: Yeah.

TD: If they're throwing up two or three times, two or more hairballs a month, there's an issue going on. Switching them to fresh food will clear that up 9 times out of 10.

KB: Yeah. That's great. That's really great advice. So, Tracy, if people wanted to learn more about all these amazing, free, great information you're providing, where do people go?

TD: You can go to CatCentric.org, of course. Everything you need, pretty much, to feed a fresh food diet is there. I have charts, diagrams, guidelines, cheat sheets and a raw feeding cat food pyramid, which I think is the only one out there. I'm kind of proud of that one. There's also information out there on behavior and general care.

If you want real-time assistance, like during a transition itself, you can go to the Facebook group. I have several wonderfully knowledgeable and compassionate advensts who will be happy to help you. The group also has a special set of volunteers we call "subject matter experts." If you're

looking for canned food, they can recommend the best canned food. I know very little about the commercial side, because my focus is on fresh food.

KB: Yeah.

TD: They can help you with the canned product. There's an IBD specialist and a couple of others. When their area of expertise pops up, we tag them to handle the questions. If you can't get answers you need from either of those resources however, or if you're having a tough behavior problem that you can't seem to solve, you can reach me on my commercial website. It's called CatCentricConsulting.com. We can setup a one-to-one consult.

KB: That's wonderful. Just endless great information, Tracy. I appreciate your commitment to improving feline health. I appreciate your commitment to feeding fresh species-appropriate diets, because there are very, very few sites out there, pertaining to cats, as you know.

TD: Yeah.

KB: Kitties just always get ignored, don't they?

TD: Absolutely.

KB: Yeah, they do. But Cat Week is improving on that. Websites like yours bring feline-related issues, particularly pertaining to nutrition in cats, front and center. I can't appreciate what you do any more. I can't be any more thankful that you've joined us to participate in celebrating all things cats. Thank you so much, Tracy.

TD: Thank you, Dr. Becker. I appreciate that you brought me on here.

[END]