

## Did You Know? Feeding Raw Can Lead Your Pet to Good Health

It's true. Integrative veterinarians see the proof every day in their practices ... and pet owners certainly know the benefits of feeding raw as they watch their dog or cat regain health, vitality and an excellent quality of life.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dr. Barbara Royal, a holistic veterinarian, author and President-Elect of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Foundation (AHVMF) sits down with Dr. Becker to discuss holistic and integrative medicine and the role of the AHVMF
- Much of what is considered holistic or alternative medicine is actually based on simple common sense. Many pet owners ultimately discover that the concepts of an integrative approach to treating their dog, cat or other companion animal make sense and are in fact easier to comprehend than many conventional medical approaches
- Dr. Royal's top three holistic health tips for pet owners include biologically appropriate nutrition as the foundation, exercise for the body and mind, and avoiding over-medicating and over-vaccinating your pet
- The AHVM Foundation's "Be One in a Million" fundraising efforts are focused on raising money for independent research into pet nutrition and alternative therapies, and funding education for vet students and practicing DVMs who are interested in providing an integrative approach to the care of their patients
- Between now and March 17, 2013, \$1 donated to the AHVM Foundation will be automatically tripled. That's right – Mercola Healthy Pets will contribute \$2 for every \$1 donation to the foundation from March 11 through March 17, 2013

**Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 11, 2013.**

Today I have a very special guest, Dr. Barbara Royal. Dr. Royal is a holistic veterinarian who practices small animal medicine and rehabilitation therapy in Chicago. She's also an author (we'll be discussing her latest book in an upcoming video) and President-Elect of the board of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Foundation (AHVMF).

This is actually Dr. Royal's second visit. I have lots of questions for her about holistic and integrative veterinary medicine and the AHVM Foundation, and I think you'll find her answers enlightening and informative.

### Why We Need Holistic and Integrative Medicine for Pets

The first thing I wanted Dr. Royal to address is a general question we, as holistic practitioners often get about why there's a need for holistic medicine at all. Why is there a need to provide alternative therapies for pets?

Barbara responded that medicine in general (for humans and animals) doesn't complete a doctor's education in a holistic way. MDs and DVMs learn a lot about surgery, a lot about medications, a lot about disease ... but they don't learn about the causes of health.

Dr. Royal believes integrative medicine helps practitioners focus on supporting health as a first priority, rather than focusing single-mindedly on treating disease once it develops.

I very much agree. Neither Barbara nor I, as veterinary students, were taught the concept of wellness. The subject was never mentioned – we weren't taught how to assist the bodies of animals to thrive and maintain wellness. We were taught only how to treat disease, which is the case with all veterinary students.

## **A Holistic, Integrative Healing Approach Is Common Sense**

Next I asked Dr. Royal how she answers skeptics who claim there are too many risks involved with holistic or alternative medicine. (Ironically, from the perspective of a holistic practitioner, there are significant risks in practicing traditional veterinary medicine.)

Dr. Royal says that when she sees new clients in her practice who seem a little resistant (but who are also desperate to help a beloved pet), she asks them to simply listen to what she has to say. She knows if she can make sense to them, in their core, and help them understand her approach to helping their pet, she has crossed the first hurdle with them.

Barbara goes on to say that what happens in holistic medicine tends to make sense to people once they give it some thought. It's about viewing and treating the body as a whole. This is very different from the conventional medical approach, which is often some variation of "Take this drug. We don't really know how it works. Good luck."

When it comes to which approach carries greater risk, Barbara believes there's much less danger involved in telling a pet parent, "Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to help support your dog's immune system by doing this, this and this. We're going to apply some foundational basics for creating health that have been in use for thousands of years."

Many people find that the common sense principles integrative medicine relies on really resonate with them – the idea that we can help the body unlock its own ability to heal and thrive. Often, common sense principles for creating wellness are overlooked in the search for hard-core science. We lose sight of the fact that very often the body knows what to do if given the opportunity.

Dr. Royal says she often discusses these concepts – what she calls "wild health" – with pet owners and members of the veterinary community. Nutrition forms the foundation ... next, add a reasonable amount of exercise (the "struggle that makes you strong") ... and don't overdo things that could cause harm.

## **Dr. Royal's Top Three Holistic Health Tips for Pet Owners**

I asked Dr. Royal to list her top three health tips for pet owners from an integrative medicine perspective.

She responded that as always, we want to focus on the basic foundations of health. What things can you do as a pet parent to keep your companion animal healthy?

The first and most important decision involves nutrition. Barbara believes (and I certainly agree) the food you offer your pet is the most important health decision of them all. If you have a carnivore in your house – a cat or a dog – you want to feed biologically appropriate food to that carnivore, which is primarily protein, a fair amount of fat, and a bit of carbohydrate. Your pet's body knows exactly what to do with a biologically appropriate diet, and it forms the foundation of good health.

Dr. Royal's second health tip is to focus on exercise for pets – exercise for the body and the mind. For example, let's say you're taking your dog for a walk. Remember that smelling things along the way is how she gathers information and learns about her environment – and that's good exercise for her brain.

You'll also want to vary the route when you walk to make it interesting for her, and also vary the terrain. If your dog walks exclusively on sidewalks, eventually that's the only type of geography she'll be able to navigate. So walk her in locations where she encounters terrain that challenges her physically and mentally, even if it's just over tree roots, up a steep driveway, or across gravel, dirt or grass.

The same approach applies to cats. Interact and play with your cat to encourage physical activity. Don't let him just go from the couch to the food bowl and back to the couch. And kitties also need mental stimulation, so think about how you can enrich your cat's environment.

The third health tip Dr. Royal suggests is to be careful not to overmedicate your pet. Try to avoid things that interfere with the body's ability to maintain good health. Don't over-vaccinate. Don't give medications just because they're available – think about whether they really make sense for your pet.

I believe many pet owners perhaps put too much faith in their veterinarians when it comes to medications. They don't know why they're giving the dog or cat a certain drug, other than "Because my vet said to." I encourage clients at my practice to be very cautious about medicating their pets. Is the drug truly necessary? Is it optional? Or is it perhaps totally unnecessary?

Talk with your vet about such things, and as Dr. Royal points out, always remember that you are the advocate for your little silent companion. You don't have to be controversial or difficult about it – just say to your vet, "I need to have this explained to me, because I'm the one who is ultimately responsible for caring for this animal."

## **Unbiased Pet Nutrition Research Gets ZERO Funding**

Next I wanted to discuss species-appropriate nutrition in more detail with Barbara. It's her favorite topic and mine, though it hasn't always been. Back in vet school, I started raw feeding my own pets and promptly made enemies of all my professors. They'd say things like, "You know, when you kill your dog, you're going to be sorry."

My nutrition training in vet school, like every other vet student's, was provided by one of the major pet food companies. I asked Dr. Royal why it is that animal nutrition often becomes a major passion for holistic veterinarians, yet most traditional vets rarely address the subject.

Barbara explained nutrition is just one of those things that medicine in general seems to forget about. It's the lost part of health care in both human and veterinary medicine, and she believes this is a huge problem. The focus is on things we can treat. What is the disease? And what medication or surgery will treat it?

Dr. Royal feels much of the problem results from who is doing the research, and also who is funding it. Profit-making enterprises like pet food companies and drug manufacturers aren't going to conduct or pay for research into things that won't improve their bottom line.

Unfortunately, companies WILL fund studies and public relations campaigns to challenge consumer trends that can potentially hurt their bottom line. The backlash we've seen against raw diets for pets and homeopathy are recent examples. The results of this type of research are typically misleading, essentially worthless in terms of their scientific value, and a waste of financial resources. The cost of one double blind, placebo-controlled study is around a million bucks.

## **AHVMF Aims to Raise Funding for Nutrition and Research**

Funding is the biggest challenge for the holistic and integrative veterinary community, and it's one of the things the AHVM Foundation is focused on. The Foundation's goal through its ongoing "Be One in a Million" campaign is to develop a huge "war chest" of funds to help set up integrative medicine educational programs in veterinary schools and pay for independent studies to develop scientific evidence of the value of complementary and alternative veterinary therapies.

Once the funding is available, the Foundation will be able to support things like scientific studies into, as an example, the safety of raw food vs. kibble ... or the health benefits of raw food vs. kibble.

Of course, most holistic veterinarians are well aware of the value of raw diets for pets. As Dr. Royal puts it, "I've been watching raw food feed animals into health for 15 years."

She makes the point that one of the most important features of a carnivore's diet is that it should be anti-inflammatory. A major problem for animals with health problems is underlying inflammation. When you feed your pet nutrition his body knows what to do with, you reduce or eliminate the inflammatory response that occurs when a body ingests food it doesn't know how to process.

Dr. Royal lists corn and wheat as the top two foods she eliminates from her patients' diets because they are unfamiliar ingredients to an animal's body and are pro-inflammatory. These two foods also cause problems for humans.

Barbara goes on to mention the problem of ingredients that aren't listed on pet food labels because they are byproducts of commercial pet food processing methods. For example, the high heat processing used to manufacture dry pet food creates heterocyclic amines and acrylamides, which are potent carcinogens.

Pet owners don't realize kibble contains glycotoxins, which can create massive inflammation. They think they're buying a very healthy kibble, but while the ingredients may have been of decent quality in their original form, the extreme processing of the kibble creates carcinogenic substances in the finished product.

Dr. Royal also talks about the lack of moisture content in kibble, which results in clinical dehydration in dogs and especially cats. So if you have an older pet or one with kidney disease, for example, the lack of moisture will eventually cause problems. As I discuss here often at Mercola Healthy Pets, long-term dehydration inevitably results in organ degeneration.

Canned foods are preferable to kibble, but the ingredients in these diets are still dead and enzyme-deficient. Enzymes play an important role in systemic health and managing inflammation. And as Barbara reminds us, so do **probiotics** – “friendly” bacteria.

## **AHVMF Also Aims to Support and Educate Vet Students and DVMs**

Next I asked Dr. Royal to explain how the AHVM Foundation furthers understanding and the knowledge base for the practice of integrative and holistic medicine.

She answered that it’s really all about getting information into the hands of the veterinary community, pet owners, and other interested parties. For example, in human medicine there are huge hospital centers like the Mayo Clinic and the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. These facilities fund large studies and the findings get out to the general population in one form or another.

In veterinary medicine, there is no equivalent. We practice in individual small clinics and hospitals, and while we’re all working very hard to help our patients, we’re operating independently rather than collaboratively. Unlike in human medicine, there’s no larger infrastructure that conducts research and publishes results for the benefit of the veterinary and pet owner communities.

Dr. Royal sees the role of the AHVM Foundation as providing that infrastructure so people have a resource to fund research and disseminate information. If you want to make a donation to the AHVMF, please click the link below.

[\*\*Donate\*\*](#)

I’d like to thank Dr. Barbara Royal, founding member of the AHVM Foundation, for joining me today for a great conversation!

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