

5 Superfood Toppers That Make Meals Tastier and Healthier

Every bite of food your pet consumes is either healing or harmful, so it's important to choose wisely and avoid making these jaw-dropping mistakes that far too many pet parents make. What are you adding to your dog's or cat's bowl?

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The good news: Pet parents are adding fresh foods to their dogs' and cats' diets
- The bad news: Some of these pet parents consider things like pancakes and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to be "fresh foods"
- Reality check: Many human foods are processed and/or very low quality; just because a food is intended for humans doesn't make it a good choice for pets
- When I encourage feeding fresh diets, treats and toppers to pets, I'm talking about unprocessed, fresh, whole fruits, veggies, meats, and organs that are biologically optimal for the species
- My recommendation is to feed your pet (and yourself) as much unprocessed, fresh, living, real food as you can afford

Here's a headline in a pet food industry journal that really grabbed my attention:

"Pet food mix-ins: adding fresh foods to dog, cat food"

"As more consumers aim for customization of their pets' food, human foods are merging with pet food options."¹

Since I'm all about offering fresh food to pets, I was really interested to read the article, which cites a survey of pet owners taken a few years ago.

According to the survey results, 22% of both dog and cat owners add commercially available toppers and mix-ins to their pet's food (which may or may not be a great idea depending on what those items are). But encouragingly, the survey showed that 18% of cat owners and 32% of dog owners add "fresh food" to their pet's diet.

'Fresh Foods'?

This seemed promising until I read a little further. Many of the "fresh foods" being offered to pets, according to pet owner survey answers, were jaw-dropping. They included (and I'm not making this up):

- Breakfast foods such as biscuits, donuts, pancakes, muesli, sausage gravy
- Sandwiches such as ham and cheese and peanut butter and jelly

- Fast food French fries, hamburgers, hot dogs, and KFC fried chicken, along with ketchup, mustard, and hot sauce
- Hot meals, including beef stew, macaroni and cheese, meat and potatoes, and meatloaf
- International foods and ingredients, including Belgian cheese, curry, mango, papaya, and salsa

If we look at just the broad categories of foods, it's only slightly less horrifying. For example, meat (beef, ham, and hamburger top the list) and meat drippings are the most common add-ins for dogs, followed by gravies, sauces or broths, and poultry.

Vegetables are also a common addition, with carrots at number one, followed by sweet potato.

Grains are almost as popular as veggies, with **rice** at the top of the list. Also in this category are miscellaneous add-ins, including buttered bread, cereal, Nutter Butter cookies, and pizza crust. Bringing up the rear are dairy products, starchy vegetables, fish, and in last place for some reason, eggs.

My Definition of Fresh Foods for Pets

The biggest takeaway from the article for me was that "fresh food" clearly means different things to different people. Based on the list above, to some pet parents fresh food seems to mean anything that doesn't come in a can or a bag labeled "dog food" or "cat food."

That's obviously not what I'm talking about when I discuss DIY fresh diets, treats and toppers for pets. My definition is food and treats that are as fresh and species appropriate as possible (meaning minimal refined carbohydrates, with high moisture content that are unprocessed/uncooked, or raw), and includes a variety of fresh, whole foods that are nutritionally complete (if you are using human food in place of pet food) and biologically appropriate for the species. It's also important you're accounting for correct caloric intake.

Dogs and cats need quality meat-based protein, fats and a small amount of low glycemic, high-roughage vegetables and fruits. Vegetables and fruits provide antioxidants, polyphenols, catechins and fiber to animals that no longer hunt whole prey.

Natural sources of trace minerals, vitamins and fatty acids must be added, since the soils in which foods are grown are depleted of many of the nutrients pets need. Also, food storage, whether it's in a freezer or a pantry, decreases critical essential fatty acid levels (DHA/EPA) in foods.

Pets need unadulterated, fresh, whole foods that are moisture dense. They absolutely do not need breakfast pastries, processed meats, sandwiches, fast food, or mac and cheese. I also don't recommend processed toppers or mix-ins for the same reasons I don't recommend processed pet food. Processed human food isn't any healthier than processed pet food.

So in a nutshell, the best foods to add to your pet's bowl come from the refrigerator, not the pantry. Foods that are considered "perishable" are also considered "fresh" (which means they rot or spoil in a short period of time if not kept cool). My take away message about toppers is don't add anything to your pet's bowl of shelf-stable pet food that doesn't come from the refrigerator.

The Fresh Food Diet I Recommend for Dogs and Cats

If you've watched my [pet food rankings video](#), you know I advocate feeding your dog or cat the highest quality diet you can afford. The top 5 types of pet food I recommend are a variety of nutritionally balanced, unprocessed (living), whole food diets. That's because the goal in feeding pets a diet they can truly thrive on is to mimic their ancestral diet as closely as possible without breaking the bank.

My essential recommendation is to feed your pet (and yourself) as much unprocessed, fresh food as you can afford. If you can't afford to feed an entirely fresh, living, raw food diet, offer fresh food snacks instead. Switching from a highly refined kibble to a gently cooked human grade pet food will also dramatically improve your pet's nutritional status. Research shows that providing any amount of healthy foods to dogs and cats is better than no healthy food at all.

Other options to consider: Feed, for example, two to four fresher food meals out of 14 in a week, or do a 50/50 split, meaning one meal a day is a processed pet food, and the other is a fresh food meal. Take baby steps toward providing the best diet you can afford for your dog or cat, and keep in mind that any amount of species-appropriate fresh food snacks and meals is better than none.

Every bite of food your pet swallows is either healing or harmful; all foods impact the body in some way. The more fresh, living, whole foods your dog or cat consumes, the better.

5 Superfood Toppers to Supercharge Your Pet's Diet

1. **Pumpkin** — Fresh pumpkin, either steamed or boiled, is relatively low in calories and high in soluble fiber, which is beneficial for pets with gastrointestinal (GI) upset. **Pumpkin helps regulate bowel function**, which relieves both diarrhea and constipation. Pumpkin is also an excellent source of potassium.
2. **Kefir** — Kefir is a fermented milk beverage that contains beneficial probiotics that support the immune system. Although regular, pasteurized cow's milk can be irritating to your pet's GI tract, fermented milk is different. One of the best and least expensive ways to add healthy bacteria to your pet's diet is to **convert raw milk to kefir yourself**.

All you need is one-half packet of kefir starter granules in a quart of raw milk (preferably organic), which you leave at room temperature overnight. Add 1 to 3 teaspoons of this super probiotic to your pet's food one to two times daily for overall improved GI defenses.

3. **Mushrooms** — **Some mushrooms are poisonous**, so obviously you'll want to avoid letting your pet consume mushrooms outside. Nontoxic, beneficial varieties include all those sold in grocery stores, including shiitake, reishi, maitake, lion's mane, king trumpet, turkey tail and himematsutake mushrooms. All mushrooms that are safe for people are safe for pets. Gently cooking mushrooms increases their medicinal benefits.

Mushrooms can help regulate bowel function, but even better, they also contain potent anticancer properties and immune system enhancers. You can either lightly cook the mushrooms in a very small amount of olive or coconut oil before adding them to your pet's meal, or try out my **mushroom broth recipe**.

4. **Sardines** — Fish are a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids, which are essential to your pet's well-being. If you supplement your dog's or cat's diet with fish, I suggest you use sardines packed in water. Sardines don't live long enough to store toxins in their bodies, and they're a terrific source of omega-3s.
5. **Fermented vegetables** — Fermented foods are potent detoxifiers and contain very high levels of probiotics and vitamins. Beneficial gut bacteria provided by probiotics break down and eliminate heavy metals and other

toxins from the body, and perform a number of other important functions.

Adding 1 to 3 teaspoons of fermented veggies to your pet's food each day (depending on body weight) is a great way to offer food-based probiotics and natural nutrients. **[Find out more about this powerhouse addition to your pet's diet.](#)**

Superfood toppers, like all additions to your pet's diet, should constitute no more than 15% of the overall caloric intake.

Sources and References

¹ [PetfoodIndustry.com, January 9, 2017](#)
