

# Is This Urban Legend Making Dog Owners Fear Fresh Foods?

It all started with a misguided 1994 study, but its faulty message has lived on, driving owners to question if this popular, super nutritious human food is OK to feed to their dogs. Even the ASPCA and AKC embrace the myth, despite another study proving its safety a decade ago.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The ultraprocessed pet food industry finally seems to be embracing the reality that avocados are not toxic for dogs, which is good news; the bad news is that like all nutritious foods, the health benefits of avocados are compromised by high heat processing and extrusion
- Unfortunately, veterinarians and organizations like the AKC and the ASPCA continue to perpetuate the myth of avocado toxicity; the result is a lot of misguided and unnecessary “fear of real food” among pet parents
- Believe it or not, this misguided advice is based on a single flawed 1994 study; a 2012 study proves the opposite — avocados are a safe and nutritious food for dogs
- Avocados are a legit superfood, loaded with the kinds of nutrition dogs need more, not less of
- Feed your dog only the parts of the avocado you would eat, i.e., the flesh, and only in small portions as toppers and treats, and your canine family member will reap the same tremendous health benefits from this nutritional powerhouse that you do

The author of an article on avocados published in a pet food industry journal observed that, “Avocado trees are a common feature in backyards throughout Latin America. Many pet dogs don’t hesitate to eat a dropped fruit, but the dogs don’t drop dead.”<sup>1</sup>

It appears the ultraprocessed pet food industry is finally embracing the idea that, contrary to veterinary and popular warnings about the dangers of feeding avocados to dogs, they may actually be safe. From the article:

*“Avocados contain a chemical called persin, a natural fungicide, which could be toxic to dogs that eat the fruit. However, in an experiment, persin seemed to be destroyed and inactivated during kibble production, leaving the resulting product safe for dogs.”*

Notice the article’s direction quickly changes from pet dogs in Latin America eating fresh avocados right off the ground, to the potential uses of avocado in ultraprocessed extruded dog food.

A team of scientists led by Maria Cattai de Godoy, an associate professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, conducted an experiment to determine if avocado-based ingredients are truly dangerous to dogs. The results of their study, published last year in the *Journal of Animal Science*,<sup>2</sup> show that indeed, “avocado has potential as a novel dog food ingredient.”

It's too bad de Godoy, who was inspired to do the research based on her memories of dogs snatching fallen avocados from beneath trees in her native Brazil, couldn't do a study on the benefits of fresh avocados for dogs. Of course, there's almost no funding for such studies, because big pet food isn't in the business of offering fresh, unadulterated diets for animal companions.

## **Fact: There Are Very Few Foods That Are 'Toxic' for Pets**

There are only a handful of foods that are truly toxic for pets, including chocolate, onions and other plants containing allium, grapes, and raisins. However, foods that may cause a problem for dogs are often lumped into the category of "toxic" when they're not; they pose a risk for vomiting, diarrhea, choking or secondary exposure risks (like mycotoxin contamination). These include:

- Foods that can trigger diarrhea when eaten in excess
- Foods that are metabolically stressful (e.g., high glycemic refined carbs, especially those containing antinutrients in the form of lectins, trypsin inhibitors, and phytates)
- High oxalate and purine foods
- High histamine foods
- Foods containing gluten or lectins
- Plants that have seeds, stems, leaves, roots, or bark that can cause side effects if consumed (leathery walnut casings, apple seeds, peanuts, citrus rinds, strawberry stems, avocado leaves, tomato leaves/plants, potato "eyes")
- Vegetables in the brassica family that can bind thyroid hormones if consumed in excess while eating an iodine-deficient diet
- Foods that may present a choking hazard (e.g., almonds, walnuts, Brazil nuts, watermelon and pineapple rinds, avocado and stone fruit pits)

Of course, depending on your dog's genetic predispositions (e.g., Dalmatians and high purine diets), previous medical issues and current health status, there are some foods your veterinarian may suggest you avoid.

This doesn't mean those foods are toxic to the species, it means your animal has a current health concern for which certain foods aren't beneficial, appropriate or ideal. These issues have been conflated with toxicosis, which has confused pet lovers around the world.

## **How a Single Study Launched a Long-Standing Myth**

Avocados are a staple in the Mexican diet, and a few years ago, when Rodney Habib and I were in Mexico City for a TedX talk, our waiter happened to mention that he fed his dog an avocado every day. This inspired us to do a **Facebook Live** about avocados and dogs, and the misguided urban legend that arose from a 1994 study.

The study, titled "Putative Avocado Toxicity in Two Dogs," came from South Africa and involved two starving dogs that sadly died from heart and organ failure.<sup>3</sup> For the record, "putative" means assumed to be or thought to be vs. definitely is. The two dogs found an avocado orchard, and because the poor things were starving, they consumed all parts of the avocado, including the stems, leaves, skin — even the tree bark.

The dogs' stomach contents weren't analyzed for the study, but the symptoms they displayed prior to death were similar to those seen in a study of 15 goats that ate avocado leaves and died. Now, it's important to note that just like tomato leaves, avocado leaves are toxic to both humans and animals. The flesh of the fruit isn't toxic, but the leaves are.

As noted above, the poisonous substance found in the skin, stems, and leaves of avocados is called persin, which is a fungicidal toxin. There's also a small amount of persin in the flesh and pit of the avocado, which is actually a benefit since research has shown that small doses of persin kill cancer cells.

## **2012 Study: Avocados Are Safe for Dogs**

To their credit, a decade ago, Procter & Gamble funded a study to find out once and for all if avocados are toxic to dogs. Researchers took avocado pits, skin, and flesh, ground them up, and fed an extract to a group of Beagles for 6 months. They discovered the avocado-based extract was completely safe.<sup>4</sup>

So, it's fine to feed your dog small amounts of avocado as toppers or treats, if you don't feed the stems, leaves, pits, skin, or even less likely, the tree bark!

Feed the same parts you'd feed to a toddler (and in the same amounts) to your dog. Just as you'd never feed an apple core to your child, or an avocado skin or pit, don't feed them to your dog.

Unfortunately, huge organizations like the AKC and the ASPCA continue to perpetuate the myth of avocado toxicity. Even the ASPCA pet insurance provider warns that avocados are toxic. The result is a lot of misguided and unnecessary "fear of real food" among pet parents.

In addition, veterinarians warn clients that higher fat foods can trigger pancreatitis, which is true, but here's what most of them are missing. Thanks to the work of the wonderful pet cancer warriors at the **KetoPet Sanctuary**, we now know it's cooked and rancid fats that cause massive oxidative stress and pancreatitis.

Raw fat, on the other hand, and avocados have a lot of it, is a "good" fat. And avocados also contain lipase, which is the enzyme necessary to break down fat. So not only do avocados contain healthy fat, but they also contain the enzyme necessary to break down the fat so the body can easily digest and assimilate it.

Coconut and MCT oil, two additional demonized healthy fats, are passively absorbed through the gut wall, not taxing the pancreas to produce any lipase at all (contrary to what you'll read online).

## **More Benefits of Avocados**

Avocados are a powerhouse of important vitamins and minerals. And because they're high in fat, they help your dog's body better absorb fat-soluble vitamins (vitamins A, D, E, and K).

Many people believe feeding foods high in fat will make their dog fat, but nothing could be further from the truth. Carbohydrates are what make mammals (including humans) fat. In addition, some dog breeds are predisposed to high triglyceride levels, for example, the Schnauzer. Higher fat foods like avocados actually decrease triglyceride levels, and in humans, they help lower LDL cholesterol. And still more benefits:

- Avocados are high in oleic acid, which helps reduce inflammation, supports heart health, and has anticancer properties
- Avocado oil is more stable than other oils at higher temperatures, so if you gently cook your dog's meals, avocado oil is a good choice
- Avocados are beneficial for gut bacteria (the microbiome)
- Three-quarters of an average sized avocado contains just a few more calories than a tablespoon of coconut oil — a good reference point for those of you worried about daily calorie intake for either you or your canine companion
- Bananas are the go-to food for potassium at 358 mgs per banana; however, an avocado contains even more at 485 mgs of potassium

Take home message #1: Don't fear the delicious, super nutritious avocado! Don't fear them for yourself, and don't be afraid to feed them to your dog! Feed the same edible parts of the avocado to your entire family (two and four legged).

Take home message #2: Avocados should be offered as toppers or treats, and limit all "add-ins" to your dog's daily diet to 10%. Follow the adage, "everything in moderation." Most foods have both positives and negatives, so don't go overboard on any one food. Also, if you'll be offering avocado to your pet for the first time, as always, start with tiny bites, and use your dog's poop as a guide to how well he or she is handling new foods.

## Sources and References

[Earth.com, March 30, 2022](#)

<sup>1</sup> [PetfoodIndustry.com, April 8, 2022](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Dainton, A.N. et al. Journal of Animal Science, Volume 100, Issue 2, February 2022](#)

<sup>3</sup> [The Onderstepoort Journal of Veterinary Research \(61\)1:107-9 April 1994](#)

<sup>4</sup> [FASEB Journal, April 1, 2012](#)

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