

3 Common Mistakes Dog Parents Make With Homemade Food

The popularity of homemade dog food is on the rise, and unfortunately, so are preparation and feeding mistakes. It's easy to prepare an unbalanced homemade meal that can even be harmful if formulated incorrectly. Be sure to avoid these three common mistakes.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dog parents everywhere are learning the importance of nutrition to the health and longevity of animal companions, and as a result are becoming more interested in homemade pet food
- Homemade diets for dogs can provide tremendous benefits, but it's not a task to take lightly, and unfortunately, mistakes are easy to make
- If you're considering making homemade dog food, it's important to have a good understanding of why the diet you prepare absolutely must be nutritionally balanced
- Common mistakes to avoid include offering only meat and veggies, forgetting your dog's need for dietary fiber, and not meeting minimum nutrient requirements with specific supplements or foods
- There are two broad categories of supplements for pets: required supplements to balance homemade meals, and optional supplements for health and wellness that support a specific health goal, such as joint, allergy, longevity or detoxification support

As I'm sure most of you are well aware, being a pet parent comes with lots of responsibilities, one of the most important of which is deciding the healthiest way to nourish furry family members.

It has been my experience that as people realize the right diet is essential to their pet's health and quality of life, the more interested they become in making homemade food for their animal companions. I absolutely encourage this, but with the caution that while switching to homemade food has tremendous benefits for most dogs, it's not always easy to do, and it's relatively easy to make mistakes.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Homemade Diets

My friend and fellow co-founder of the Companion Animal Nutrition and Wellness Institute ([CANWI](#)), board certified veterinary nutritionist Dr. Donna Raditic, made a presentation not long ago to a group of veterinarians during which she offered the following short list of pros and cons of homemade raw diets.

Benefits

- You know exactly what your dog is eating (which isn't possible with commercially prepared pet food — especially ultraprocessed diets)

- Pets eating homemade diets don't poop as much, because the ingredients have higher digestibility, with the result that most of the nutrients in the food are absorbed rather than excreted in feces
- Some animals with chronic gastrointestinal (GI) issues or multiple chronic diseases improve on homemade diets
- It's easy to create novel protein/novel carbohydrate homemade diets for pets with food intolerances or allergies
- Preparing a homemade diet can provide you with a sense of satisfaction that you're helping your dog

Potential drawbacks

- Homemade diets can be unbalanced and even harmful if formulated incorrectly
- They can be more expensive than commercially available pet food (especially if you choose organic ingredients)
- A pet parent decides to make changes to a recipe without consulting an expert
- There are no AAFCO feeding trials/nutritional analysis reports to help guide feeding decisions

Why Nutritional Balance in Homemade Diets Is ESSENTIAL

Many homemade and prey-model diets and some commercially available raw diets are nutritionally unbalanced. This can cause dogs to become deficient in the important minerals and vitamins, antioxidants, and/or essential fatty acids necessary for skeletal, organ, and immune health.

A considerable amount of research has gone into determining what nutrients dogs need to survive, and there is ample evidence showing what happens when they are deprived of nutrients such as calcium, iodine, selenium, magnesium, zinc, thiamine, manganese, vitamins D, E, potassium, and others necessary for cell growth, repair, and maintenance.

The minimum amount of nutrients needed to sustain life is what constitutes the term "complete" (aka the minimum amount of nutrients needed to sustain life; all the basic vitamins and minerals are present in the diet).

"Balanced" pertains to the relationship of nutrients to one another. For instance, calcium and phosphorus must be in correct proportions, relating to one another, in addition to being provided in the correct amounts (which are different for early growth, late growth and adult).

There should be four primary components in a raw diet for dogs: meat, including organs; pureed vegetables and fruit; a homemade vitamin and mineral mix (in most cases); and beneficial additions like probiotics, digestive enzymes, and super green foods (these aren't required to balance the diet, but can be beneficial for vitality).

It's possible to meet minimum nutrient requirements using all whole foods, it's just very expensive, so most pet parents choose to use supplements to help meet daily minimum nutritional requirements.

A healthy dog's diet should contain about 75% to 85% meat/organs/bones (or a "bone replacement" supplement) and 15% to 25% veggies/fruits (this mimics the gastrointestinal contents of prey, providing key nutrients, as well as critical fiber and antioxidants as well).

This “80/10/10” plus fiber “base” is an excellent starting point for recipes but is far from balanced and is not appropriate to feed long term without addressing the significant micronutrient deficiencies.

Fresh, whole food provides the majority of nutrients dogs need, and a micronutrient vitamin/mineral mix takes care of deficiencies that may exist. As I mentioned, if you opt not to use supplements, you must add in specific whole food sources of these nutrients, which requires additional money, creativity, and math (or finding a commercial raw food that has done the sourcing and math for you).

If you’re preparing a homemade diet for your pet, I can’t emphasize enough the importance of ensuring it’s nutritionally balanced. Making your dog’s food from scratch requires you to ensure you’re meeting macro and micronutrient requirements. Do not guess. Follow nutritionally balanced recipes (which must come with a complete nutritional analysis) or use a recipe generator like **Animal Diet Formulator**, or **BalancelT**.

3 Mistakes to Avoid

1. **Feeding only meat** — Many well-meaning pet guardians are confusing balanced, species-specific nutrition with feeding hunks of muscle meat, ground beef and veggies or a blend of meat, veggies, and rice to their dog. Although fresh meat is a good starting point for homemade diets, it’s far from representing a nutritionally adequate diet.

Feeding a basic “80/10/10” diet is also nutritionally unbalanced and will cause significant issues over time, even if you provide rotation between 3-4 types of meats and organs.

An exclusive diet of ground up carcasses,¹ for example, may still lack the minimum requirements for a number of vital nutrients and falls grossly short of almost all nutrients to meet even AAFCO’s minimum nutrient requirements (which isn’t saying much).

Many homemade raw feeders create diets that are predominantly chicken-based, because chicken is cheap. Chicken meat must be balanced with foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids to control inflammation. Ground up whole chicken fryers have an omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acid ratio of 20:1. I recommend ensuring foods don’t cross the 5:1 ratio, and the goal would be to a 2:1 ratio.

Without balancing these fats, skin and coat health is compromised, and many animals end up with chronic inflammation that is manifested in many unhealthy ways.

2. **Forgetting fiber** — Domesticated and wild dogs voluntarily graze on grasses and plant matter for a variety of reasons, including meeting their body’s requirements for enzymes, fiber, antioxidants, and phytonutrients. Providing adequate amounts of low glycemic, fibrous vegetables also provides the prebiotic fibers necessary to nourish your pet’s microbiome and contributes to overall gut and colon health.

Some fruits, for example, blueberries, are rich sources of antioxidants, so it’s important not to overlook them when planning your dog’s nutritionally balanced fresh food diet. You can puree fruits, along with appropriate low glycemic veggies, and add them into the recipe; you can also offer them whole in small pieces as treats or snacks as long as your dog has no problem digesting them.

A good rule of thumb is to keep produce content less than 25% of the diet for dogs and 15% for cats, which mimics what these animals would self-select in the wild.

3. **Skipping supplements** — There are only two options for assuring nutritional adequacy in homemade diets: 1) feeding a more expensive, whole food recipe that contains a significant number of diversified ingredients necessary to meet nutrient requirements or 2) using supplements.

There are two categories of supplements: required supplements needed for a diet to meet minimum nutritional requirements, and optional supplements you may choose to address a specific health concern. The supplements we are discussing here are the required supplements that prevent nutritional deficiencies, meaning they aren't optional.

Our soils are nutritionally depleted; therefore, our foods are nutritionally deficient. If we take on the task of preparing homemade meals for our pets, we have a responsibility to make sure the food provides the basic required nutrients necessary for normal cellular repair and maintenance.

If you don't see ample amounts of a variety of whole foods listed in the recipes (or amounts of these supplements to add) then the diet is nutritionally inadequate (deficient). Feeding an unbalanced meal now and then is fine. Feeding unbalanced meals day after day is what causes problems over time, and the number one reason why veterinarians discourage homemade diets.

Recipes provided by nutritionists or knowledgeable fresh food advocates provide a complete nutritional breakdown that shows you the amounts of nutrients found in the recipes (over two dozen), compared to recognized standards.

The "bonus" or optional supplements that help support general wellness or a specific health goal depend on a variety of factors, including breed and disease susceptibility, age, weight, activity level, sterilization status, chronic health conditions, and more.

Many pets benefit from additional supplements to support specific organ systems, such as joint support for seniors, seasonal allergy supplements, or detox supplements during pesticide application months. These extras don't balance meals, they support the body in other ways, beyond meeting baseline nutrient requirements.

If you're interested in providing additional supplemental support (beyond the supplements needed to balance your homemade diet) and have no idea where to start, work with your veterinarian or wellness coach to determine what supplements would be beneficial, in addition to those added to the food to balance the diet, how much to give, and how often.

More Tips for Formulating and Preparing Homemade Pet Diets

From Dr. Raditic:

- Homemade pet diet recipes should include information on how to prepare the food in batches that can be frozen to save time and money
- If you don't want to or can't afford to feed 100% homemade, feed fruit as treats or add veggies to meals — keep a list of fresh food options on hand that can be safely added to commercial pet food
- Pets should have routine physical examinations with full blood and urine testing every 6 months

- Grind and blend the food, if possible, so your dog doesn't pick out individual ingredients
- Use cooked gram weights instead of cups as a unit of measurement, because a "cup" can vary greatly depending on how finely you cut ingredients; cooked gram weights (you'll need a scale) is the most accurate way to measure food amounts.
- Avoid Maillard reactions by poaching ingredients, not roasting or grilling, to avoid damage to protein structures, which may affect the absorption of essential amino acids and/or increase the antigen load in the diet
- Prepare food for several weeks or a few months to save time; package in individual portions and freeze

Sources and References

¹ [Center for Companion Animal Health, School of Veterinary Medicine, UC Davis, May 2002](#)
