

Setting the Facts Straight About Feeding Raw Food

This Italian study examining the reasons pet parents switch their dogs from processed pet food to raw meat-based meals matches what I see in my clinic experiences. However, it ends up twisting facts in an apparent attempt to scare owners away from fresh pet food and back to processed meals.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A team of Italian researchers published the results of a 2019 study that examined the reasons pet parents switch their dogs from processed pet food to raw meat-based diets (RMBDs)
- The top three reasons for making the move, according to study participants, were: lack of ingredient information, additives, and carbohydrate content
- The researchers, who seem to have a bias against raw feeding, concluded (erroneously, in my opinion) that most people who feed homemade raw diets have no clue what they're doing or the risks involved
- The researchers also naively suggest dog parents should consult veterinarians about preparing nutritionally balanced RMBDs for their pets
- Bottom line, this study appears to be another attempt by the anti-raw movement to scare pet parents away from fresh pet food and back to processed diets

Not long ago, a team of university researchers in Italy conducted a study to explore the reasons why dog owners decide to feed their pets raw meat-based diets (RMBDs), in this case, homemade. Their research results were published in the journal *BMC Veterinary Research*¹ in 2019.

According to the Declarations section of the study, none of the researchers is affiliated with a processed pet food company, and "no special funding" was used for their research, which is a little surprising to me given the overall thrust of the work and the conclusions drawn.

To compile their data, the researchers conducted a web-based survey of 218 dog owners, 62 of whom were reportedly living with someone with an impaired or weakened immune system. This is also a little surprising — what are the chances, from a randomly selected and relatively small group of dog owners, that 28% would be living with someone who is immunocompromised? I'm not drawing any conclusions from my questions — I'm simply offering them as food for thought.

3 Important Reasons Pet Parents Quit Commercial Dog Food

Of the 218 survey respondents, 94% had experience with commercial dog food, and nearly 80% had completely stopped feeding it to their canine family members, for the following reasons:

1. Lack of ingredient origin, quality and other data — 78%
2. Inclusion of additives — 46%
3. Presence of carbohydrates — 17%

The majority of survey-takers reported that offering their dog a healthy, natural diet was their primary motivation for feeding homemade raw dog food, and 94% believe raw meat dog food is safe. They also reported that feeding homemade raw diets made their dogs' coats shinier, their teeth cleaner, and also resulted in increased muscle mass.

In my experience, these results in dogs switched from processed to raw diets are extremely common, and really only scratch the surface of the positive changes pet parents see in their dogs' health, overall vitality, and even their behavior after switching from ultraprocessed to raw.

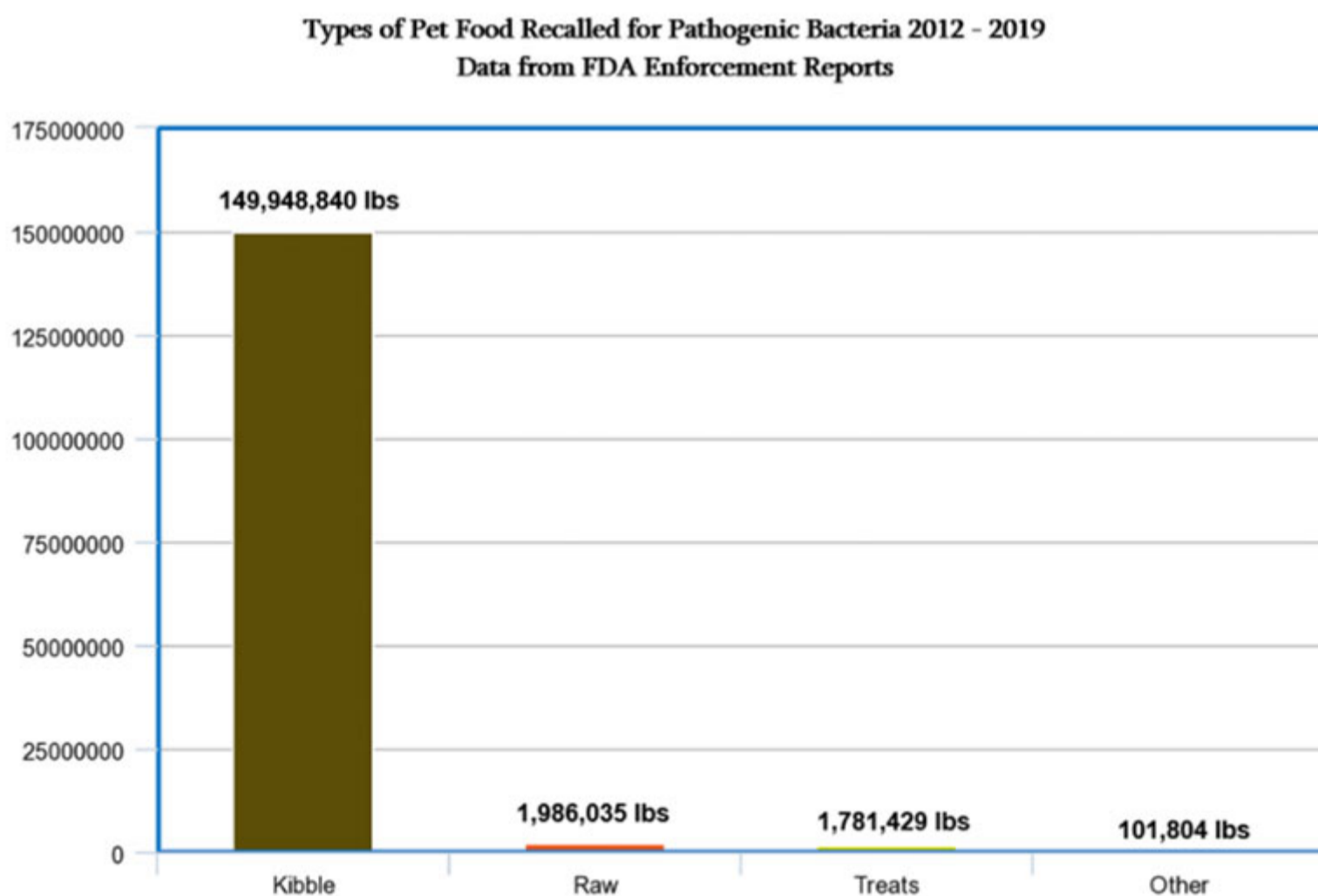
Study: Dog Owners Don't Understand the 'Risks' of Raw Diets

The researchers concluded the following based on the data they collected:

"As revealed by this study, most owners are unaware of the risks posed by the feeding of RMBDs for both animal and human health, and they often rely on questionable sources for advice on pet nutrition. Owners see RMBDs as a more natural and healthier alternative to commercial pet food even if the actual benefits remain unproven."

This conclusion is so very typical of the position of individuals and organizations with a vested interest in promoting and/or selling processed pet food, that it's hard to believe the Italian researchers don't also fall into that category.

Interestingly, when you look at the volume (in pounds) of pet food recalled for potential pathogen risks, the warnings should be issued for kibble feeders, not raw feeders, as highlighted by the FDA Enforcement Reports:



(Graph courtesy of TruthAboutPetFood.com; read the full article [here](#))

Per the above graph, the pet food most often contaminated with potentially pathogenic bacteria was kibble, by a landslide, which is why I find it ironic the media fear mongering is geared towards human-grade fresh food. Raw pet food paled by comparison, on the contamination scale, to dry pet food, even in the midst of a raw food witch hunt!

Statistically speaking, there's a much higher risk of contaminating your immunosuppressed family members with the average bag of dog chow than feeding human-grade meats. And if you want to feed a species-appropriate fresh food diet with none of the risks associated with raw meat, 50% of raw food manufacturers offer near-sterile (high pressure pasteurized, or HPP) raw food diets.

Pasteurized raw food is deemed bacteria-free, something no brand of kibble can claim. I don't believe healthy animals should consume sterilized diets in perpetuity, but the point is the fresh food segment of the pet food industry offers several methods of pathogen control, including HPP, that are currently not available for the kibble sector.

All commercial raw diets sold in the U.S. must also adhere to the zero tolerance policy for pathogenic bacteria, so it seems the fear mongering may come from a place of industry ignorance. In addition, the idea that the benefits of raw meat-based diets is "unproven" is laughable, given that dogs have been thriving on exactly those diets for their entire existence.

Processed pet food has only been around for about 100 years; dogs first became domesticated somewhere between 16,000 and 32,000 years ago, and canids (members of the carnivorous family Canidae that includes wolves, jackals, foxes, coyotes, and domestic dogs) have been on the planet for tens of millions of years.

One of the reasons I co-wrote **The Forever Dog** book was to put the impressive and ever-growing body of real food research in one place. The hundreds of references discussing the benefits of fresh foods can be found on the Forever Dog website, and there are also many studies banked at **petfoodstudies.com**.

To back up their statement that "most owners are unaware of the risks posed by the feeding of RMBDs," the researchers offer the following statistics:

- 94% of respondents said they consider RMBDs safe for pets
- 1% acknowledged the possibility of health risks
- 5% "never raised the issue"
- 65% stated dogs cannot get ill by consuming a RMBD
- 38% said it's possible but no reason to worry
- 5% had never heard of the possibility of illness
- 13% said dogs can get ill
- 55% never noticed side effects from eating RMBDs
- 45% reported mainly diarrhea, constipation, and vomiting

I'm not getting from these numbers why the researchers concluded the surveyed dog owners are "unaware" of the risks associated with feeding raw meat. With the exception of the 5% who had never heard of the possibility of illness, these responses appear to be from average adult pet parents who know how to safely handle raw meat. In defining the risks that so worry the researchers, they state:

“The spread of zoonotic bacterial pathogens either from contaminated raw meat products or from the feces of pets fed RMBDs has been incontrovertibly demonstrated and therefore poses concrete risks to the health of the people handling raw meat products while preparing the diet or simply living in contact with animals consuming RMBDs.”

Contaminated raw meat and dog poop can indeed contain bacterial pathogens, but that’s not what raw feeders — including, I’m sure, those surveyed for the study — offer their dogs. Nor does any adult of average intelligence come in contact with tainted meat or dog feces without taking common sense hygiene precautions.

Most people who eat meat have been handling it raw before cooking it their entire adult lives. Does it make sense that they’re suddenly incapable of safely handling raw meat for dog meals? Since 94% of the survey respondents, all of whom are raw feeders, consider RMBDs safe for pets, it leaves one to wonder why the study authors are so vested in pushing the opposite point of view.

Further, dry pet food has caused documented outbreaks of salmonella infections in children² with little commentary from the pet food industry or the media about the risks associated with feeding this highly processed, potentially dangerous, unnatural foodstuff to furry family members over a lifetime.

Most Owners Don’t Ask Their Veterinarians for Dietary Advice

Another area of concern for the researchers was unbalanced homemade raw diets. Their recommendation:

“Consulting veterinarians for proper information and board-certified nutritionists for the formulation of complete and balanced RMBDs should be promoted.”

According to PetfoodIndustry.com:

“More than half of the respondents stated that the internet was their preferred source of information about raw, meat-based dog foods. Only nine percent received that info from their veterinarian, and eight percent looked to vets for formulation advice.”³

I, too, am very concerned about nutritional imbalances in homemade pet food, and I think recommending that pet parents consult veterinarians and board-certified nutritionists to help formulate complete and balanced raw diets is a fantastic idea, conceptually.

Unfortunately, veterinary students aren’t taught how to balance rations or formulate balanced diets for small animals. Large animal vet students graduate with a much better understanding of balancing rations for nutritional adequacy than small animal vets.

Even more disheartening, most veterinary schools have contracts with kibble manufacturers, which is the equivalent of pharmaceutical companies teaching medical students pharmacology and sponsoring medical residencies. The result? The vast majority of vet students don’t receive any training or education related to nutritionally balanced, real food diets, other than being advised to avoid them.

Vet students aren't taught how to use the **Animal Diet Formulator** software to easily construct nutritionally complete homemade diets, they are taught to recommend highly processed pet food. So if owners choose not to buy the feed grade-quality "prescription pet foods" (made with USDA inspected and failed ingredients) or their pet can't consume industrialized pet food due to a medical condition or intolerance, only the fresh-feeding community can help them.

I'm pretty sure that's why over 50% of the survey-takers consulted online resources about raw diets, and less than 10% sought information from their veterinarians. Thankfully there are a growing number of vets that support the feeding of biologically correct fresh foods and even a worldwide Raw Feeding Veterinary Society.

It's actually very encouraging that pet parents are learning as much as possible about companion animal nutrition, and not relying solely on their veterinarians for advice, especially when they may only have access to vets who still recommend a lifetime diet of highly processed foods. Some even go so far as to say giving *any* living foods could be harmful to a pet's health!

If you can't find a veterinarian to help you create a balanced meal plan for your pet, visit **Directory of Professional Fresh Pet Food Consultants** to find a fresh food formulator or consider **Meal Mix for Dogs**.

The following is a spectacular comment by "alisonk" to the PetfoodIndustry.com article I quoted from earlier (a comment that, oddly, seems to have disappeared from the site!), and shows just how savvy some pet food consumers are becoming:

"Veterinarians are the worst source for nutrition advice for your dogs (and cats for that matter). They only 'know' what they have been 'taught' in veterinary schools that are backed by Mars, Purina, and their ilk, and thus regurgitate the 'science' that they have been fed in order to sell those horrible feed quality, chemical laden pet foods.

It appalls me that they lack basic logic and critical thinking when it comes to nutrition, and further lack basic knowledge when it comes to our dogs' physiology and how that impacts and determines their dietary needs. Yes, dogs are carnivores. Need proof? Look at their teeth and their jaws: not a flat tooth in the mouth and no hinged jaw (so no chewing) — compare this to humans', who are omnivores.

Yes, a balanced raw diet is the most biologically appropriate. It provides naturally occurring moisture in the meats, organs, some bone/cartilage, incidental produce not necessary. A kill step for raw diets is not necessary, and in fact can and often does destroy beneficial bacteria and enzymes that aide in digestion and absorption of nutrients.

There are some very good commercially available balanced raw diets at specialty pet retailers. Ground meat from your grocery store is not a balanced raw diet. Cooking is not raw. No, corn nor other vegetable proteins nor vegetable fats are appropriate because they do not contain the appropriate amino and fatty acids that carnivores require.

Big AG will always find a way to promote these falsehoods because it's all about the Benjamins, baby.

Through domestication dogs have become reliant on us for their food needs. They have lost their wild drive to provide their own sustenance (this is why you will see starving strays). Domestication has not changed their dietary needs: their physiology is basically the same. Humans have decided to force diets of convenience, of waste, of excess, of lifestyle on our pets with no regard for their health and wellbeing."

Bottom line: My recommendation is to ignore this study and others like it. If you're already feeding a raw diet to your dog or are considering it, this site has a wealth of information on how to do it right, which is to say, make homemade raw meals for your dog that are nutritionally balanced and species-appropriate. An excellent stepping off point is here: [5 Raw Feeding Mistakes to Avoid](#).

Sources and References

¹ [Morelli, G. et al. BMC Veterinary Research, Volume 15, Article number: 74 \(2019\)](#)

² [Barton Behraves, C. et al. Pediatrics, 2010 Sep;126\(3\):477-83](#)

³ [PetfoodIndustry.com, March 15, 2019](#)
