

The Best and Worst Ways to Feed Your Pet Organ Meats

Fresh, unprocessed organ meats are a nutritional powerhouse for both dogs and cats. But what's the easiest - and healthiest - way to provide them? No matter what the package says, I recommend avoiding this popular source at all costs. Instead, here's a quick and easy way to provide them.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Fresh, unprocessed organ meats are an excellent source of nutrition for dogs and cats
- Unfortunately, organ meats included in ultraprocessed kibble have been rendered along with much less desirable animal parts like beaks, hooves, feathers and hair
- It's impossible to know with rendered protein meal if your pet is getting mostly nutritious ingredients or mostly garbage ingredients; in addition, the extreme high-heat processing compromises the nutritional value of all ingredients
- The ideal way to provide organ meats to your dog or cat is by preparing nutritionally balanced homemade pet meals or feeding a commercially prepared, complete and balanced fresh pet food

Ultraprocessed pet food manufacturers are acutely aware that a growing army of well-informed pet parents are choosing to avoid pet food containing by-products. One demonstration of industry awareness is an article in a pet food industry journal titled "Beef by-products: No guts no glory! — There are many quality choices regarding organ meats and beef by-products."

"Let's talk about by-products," the author writes. "Beef by-products, or anything labeled as a 'by-product' for that matter, are not popular in 'premium' pet foods these days. This is in large part due to marketing campaigns that have denigrated these ingredients for the connotation that their name implies.

*So, it is leveraging perceptions to differentiate a product. To change this, there may be some opportunities to improve transparency and traceability in the supply stream to enhance consumer confidence."*¹

The author goes on to describe beef by-products in their unadulterated state (meaning, before they are rendered, extruded, and high-heat processed by commercial pet food manufacturers) and the significant nutrition they provide.

Another earlier article published in 2012 in the same journal also celebrated the virtues of by-products containing organ meats in commercial pet food formulas. The author wrote:

"As a group, organ meats are wholesome, quality sources of protein and other nutrients. The folks feeding raw food, home-prepared diets and the out-on-the edge extreme performance diets have recognized the value of organ meats in their dog and cat diets for years.

*The value brands have quietly been customers, too. But in many pet food marketing campaigns, organ meats are being shunned because they are categorized derisively as by-products. By-product or delicacy — it's in the eye of the beholder. Maybe the critics just don't understand what dogs and cats really want."*²

Fact: Fresh Organ Meats Are a Nutritional Powerhouse

The article authors are absolutely correct about the superior nourishment dogs and cats can receive from fresh, unprocessed organ meats, which have high nutrient density, an excellent nutrient profile and high digestibility. In fact, if your dog or cat lived in the wild, many parts of their natural prey, including smaller bones, most of the internal organs, eyes, tongue, the thyroid and other glands would provide essential nutrients.

In 2021, veterinary researcher Dr. Anna Hielm-Björkman and her DogRisk team published a **paper** examining puppy diets as a factor in the development of allergies and skin problems later in life.³ Her research provides even more reasons to offer fresh organ meats to puppies as part of a balanced, fresh food diet, as there was a significant and possibly protective effect against the incidence of allergy/atopy skin signs in adulthood.

Both authors of the pet food industry journal articles make the point that while organ meats are indeed used in commercial pet food, marketing campaigns and promotional materials for the products avoid revealing that they are.

They believe the reason the presence of organ meats, for example, the glandular stomach, small intestine, large intestine, heart, liver, lung, spleen, kidney, bladder, udder and others is not mentioned, is because they fall into the category of by-products, and by-products are not what informed pet owners want to feed their dogs and cats.

How Organ Meats Become By-Products

The author of the 2012 article claims that organ meats sold to the pet food industry start out as "... fresh, chilled and frozen internal organs from animals and fish slaughtered under humane, sanitary and safe practices in our modern food processing facilities."

He also makes the point that since most animal organs are channeled from the human food industry to the manufacturers of pet food ingredients, organ meats can represent a substantial portion of the contents of dog and cat food. But here's the problem — he didn't explain the human food inspection process.

Foods entering the human food chain are analyzed by USDA inspectors and either pass or fail ("condemned meats"). During meat processing, all the tissues and delicacies approved for human consumption are removed for that purpose, and what's left goes to the feed industry, including pet food. Said another way, animal tissues that fail USDA inspection, meaning they're not safe for human consumption, go into animal feed/pet food.

These "feed grade" organ meats wind up in the various rendered protein meals such as poultry by-product meal, meat and bone meal, pork meal, lamb meal or fish meal. And unfortunately, pet food made with these dried meat meals can be **deceptively labeled as "made with real meat"** on the packaging.

The rendering process involves combining "raw product" sourced from meat slaughtering and processing plants; dead animals from farms, ranches, feedlots, marketing barns, animal shelters, and other facilities; and fats, grease, and other food waste from restaurants and stores.

The “raw product” mixture is cooked at high temperatures (creating damaging compounds your pet will consume, including heterocyclic amines), the moisture is removed, and then it’s pulverized into a powdery material known as meat and bone meal that has wildly variable amounts of minerals, as no two batches are the same.

Along the way, most of the grease is skimmed away (to be used as a part of the “top coat” sprayed on dry food after processing), and excess hair and large bone chips are removed from the powder.

So while a given mix of rendered protein may contain organ meats (that were more nutritious before being exposed to extremely high heat and other processing methods), it’s certainly not made from any human edible parts, so it’s just as likely to contain bits and pieces of non-nutritious items like beaks, feathers, feet, hooves, hair, and tumors.

If you buy a pet food containing by-products, you might luck out once in awhile and get a mixture containing primarily organ meats, livers and hearts, for example, that are adequately digestible and nutritious.

However, it’s just as or more likely you’ll get an ingredient mixture containing few nutritious organ meats, and plenty of hard to digest pieces-and-parts of carcass remains. That’s one of the essential problems with by-products — the nutrition value and digestibility of ingredients can’t be counted on from one ingredient batch to the next.

And let’s face it, if by-products consisted exclusively of nutrient-rich organ meats with better quality protein than muscle meats, pet food companies would have long ago figured out how to market them accordingly. As it stands, slaughterhouse leftovers forbidden from entering the human food chain are what make up the bulk of pet food “meats” (unless you buy pet food made with human-edible ingredients, which account for less than 2% of the market).

It is for this reason (and many others) that I always recommend avoiding pet food containing any sort of by-product or meat meal. Unfortunately, originally nutritious animal muscle and organ meats are significantly compromised when they become part of the commercial pet food rendering process.

Treats Are a Great Way to Offer Your Pet Organ Meats

Organ meats can also be found in many commercial pet treats. Unfortunately, most of those products contain inappropriate ingredients like grains, unnecessary fillers, rendered animal by-products, added starches or sugar (sometimes hidden in molasses and honey), chemical flavorings and artificial preservatives.

Your best bet is to look for freeze dried or dehydrated organ meat treats, which thankfully are becoming easier to find, but your best bet shopping locally is to visit small, independent pet stores with knowledgeable staff.

Also, most excellent quality, human-grade pet food producers also make a few types of treats, so if you're already feeding your dog or cat a high-quality commercial pet food you trust, see if the manufacturer also makes freeze dried or dehydrated organ meat treats.

You can also find frozen organ meats online to use as meal toppers. Adding up to 10% healthy “extras” to your pet’s food (including grass-fed, free-range organ meats) is a great way to improve the nutrient content of any bowl of pet food. The more variety, the better.

Organ Meats in Commercial Raw and Homemade Pet Food

High quality, nutritionally optimal, commercial fresh food diets contain organ meats, so if you're feeding your dog or cat one of these, chances are they're getting the benefit of these nutritious ingredients.

If you make your pet's food at home, I recommend using recipes from knowledgeable fresh food nutrition experts (you can find a fresh food consultant to work with [here](#)) that will explain the best way to include a variety of organ meats to meet mineral requirements in your homemade pet meals.

Sources and References

¹ [PetfoodIndustry.com, February 10, 2021](#)

² [PetfoodIndustry.com, September 11, 2012](#)

³ [Hemida, M.B.M. et al. Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, Volume 35, Issue 5, September/October 2021, Pages 2374-2383](#)
