

Navigating the Dos and Don'ts of Pet Treats

Putting these ideas to work will give you peace of mind that the treats you offer your dog or cat are safe and healthy.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dog and cat treats are a large and fast-growing segment of the ultraprocessed pet food market; the pet food industry considers treats “the gift that keeps on giving”
- Well-meaning pet parents are increasing the number of treats they feed, perhaps without understanding their caloric impact or nutritional value
- Despite the growing popularity of dog and cat treats, it's important to remember that treats should represent no more than 10% of your pet's daily calorie intake
- Good guidelines to follow when selecting pet treats include ensuring all the ingredients are high-quality and sourced exclusively in the U.S.
- If your goal with treats is to bond with your pet while simultaneously supporting his or her health, you should definitely consider offering nutritious human foods in place of ultraprocessed, packaged treats

According to ultraprocessed pet food industry leaders, treats are the “gift that keeps on giving” (to their bottom line). In the U.S., dog treat sales were up about 20% from June 2022 to June 2023, and cat treat sales doubled that growth at a whopping 40%.¹

The results of a survey conducted in May 2023 by Packaged Facts showed that 73% of U.S. dog and cat owners use treats to “bond and spend quality time with their pets.”²

Pet parents also see treats “as a delivery mechanism for functional ingredients and similar benefits — in fact, supporting pet health,” and over 40% of both dog and cat owners in the U.S. see treats as among the products most important to their pets' health.³ Dog and cat owners are interested in functional treats that address:

- Dental care/oral hygiene
- Digestive health/probiotics
- Calming/stress
- Joint health
- Allergies
- Skin and coat health

Pet parents also want treats with no artificial ingredients or preservatives, that are organic, grain free, natural, limited ingredient and vegetarian, and most importantly, claim to be “made in the USA.”

Why Less Is More When It Comes to Pet Treats

Treats, even very healthy ones, shouldn't constitute more than 10% of your pet's daily food intake, and it's best to limit them to training and behavior rewards, as a bedtime ritual, or as a “time to get in your crate” enticement. They should be pea-sized and offered primarily as rewards during house training, obedience training or other similar activities.

It's important to remember that cat and dog treats aren't a complete form of nutrition for your pet and should never be fed in place of nutritionally optimal, species-specific meals. Overfeeding treats on top of daily food intake will result in an obese pet. Overfeeding treats while underfeeding balanced meals will result in a dog or cat with nutritional deficiencies. Most importantly, sharing **human fresh foods from the refrigerator** means you can offer fresh, low calorie, antioxidant-rich morsels that greatly diversify the microbiome.

Treats Should Be Sourced AND Made in the U.S.

Legally, pet food manufacturers can use the “made in the U.S.A.” claim as long as the product was assembled in this country, even if the ingredients are imported. So, when you're shopping for safe treats, it's not enough that a product claims to be made in the U.S. You want to be sure all the ingredients originated here as well.

The U.S. certainly produces its own share of tainted products, but as a general rule, the contaminating agent is quickly identified and these days, immediate action is taken to remove the product from store shelves.

That said, I have found several excellent quality treats from New Zealand and Canada. The important point is to know and trust your treat company's commitment to purity and quality control.

Treats Should Be High Quality

A high quality pet treat will be made with all human-grade ingredients and not contain grains or unnecessary fillers, rendered animal byproducts, added sugar (sometimes hidden in ingredients like molasses and honey), chemicals, artificial preservatives, or ingredients known to be highly allergenic to pets. These criteria rule out the vast majority of commercial pet treats on the market.

As is the case with commercially available pet foods, high quality pet treats aren't likely to be found in big-box stores, large pet store chains, your local supermarket, or your veterinarian's office. Your best bet shopping locally is to visit small, independent pet stores with knowledgeable staff who can answer customer questions and are competent to recommend products that make sense for individual pets.

Most excellent quality, human grade pet food producers — typically smaller companies — 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 treats.

Another option is to shop online, especially if you've done your research and know exactly what you're looking for.

Definitely Offer Fresh Human Foods as Treats

I recommend avoiding all grain-based treats. Your dog or cat has no biological requirement for the carbs in these treats, and in addition, they are pro-inflammatory. If your goal is to pamper your furry family member while also supporting his or her health, consider instead offering nutritious, functional, living “human” foods.

Most of the following foods will be more popular with dogs than cats, but they're safe for both; be sure to serve them plain (no sugar, salt or spices, butter, or other additives), in moderation and in small portions. Organic food has fewer contaminants and residues.

1. **Apples** — Apples contain powerful antioxidants and vitamin C. Serve apple slices to your pet, but never the core or seeds.
2. **Asparagus** — Asparagus is an excellent source of vitamin K, A, B1, B2, C and E, along with the folate, iron, copper, fiber, manganese and potassium.
3. **Blueberries** — Fresh or frozen, blueberries are loaded with phytochemicals, and their deep blue hue is the result of anthocyanidins, which are powerful antioxidants. Blueberries are also a good source of healthy fiber, manganese, and vitamins C and E. Introduce blueberries slowly to your pet — too much too soon can cause digestive upset.

Blueberries are available all year and make great training treats for dogs. A good rule of thumb is 2-4 blueberries as treats for every 10 pounds of dog a day. Replacing one of the processed treats you feed each day with fresh or frozen blueberries is a great way to increase antioxidants in your pet's diet.

4. **Broccoli** — Broccoli supports detoxification processes in your pet's body; contains healthy fiber to aid digestion; is rich in beneficial nutrients like potassium, calcium, protein and vitamin C; has anti-inflammatory properties; supports eye health; helps repair skin damage; and supports heart health.

I always prefer local organic produce, however, conventionally grown broccoli is one of the cleanest (most pesticide-free) foods you can buy, so eat up! Your pet may prefer broccoli steamed, although many dogs eat florets fresh without a problem. Chopped broccoli stems make great detox treats, too.

5. **Carrots** — Carrots are low in calories and high in fiber and vitamins. Many dogs enjoy snacking on a fresh crunchy carrot, and some will even eat the green tops.
6. **Chia** — Chia is a seed derived from the desert plant *Salvia hispanica* that grows abundantly in southern Mexico. It is a source of plant-based omega-3 fatty acids and also antioxidants. And unlike flax seeds, chia seeds don't need to be ground.

Chia seeds also provide fiber, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, manganese, copper, iron, molybdenum, niacin, and zinc. Try sprinkling some chia seeds on your dog's meals or mix some with a little coconut oil for a super nutrient dense bedtime snack.

7. **Cottage cheese** — Plain organic cottage cheese is high in calcium and protein.
8. **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 1-3 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.**

9. **Green beans** — Fresh, locally grown green beans are a source of vitamins A, C, and K. They also provide calcium, copper, fiber, folic acid, iron, niacin, manganese, potassium, riboflavin and thiamin, as well as beta carotene.
10. **Kale** — This dark green cruciferous vegetable is loaded with vitamins (especially vitamins K, A and C), iron, and antioxidants. It helps with liver detoxification and also has anti-inflammatory properties. Add 1-3 tablespoons of minced or chopped kale to your pet's food daily, depending on body weight, as a great source of fiber, nutrients and whole food antioxidants.
11. **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 dog'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 1-3 teaspoons of this super probiotic to your dog's food 1-2 times daily for overall improved GI defenses.

12. **Mushrooms** — Mushrooms range from life-saving to **poisonous**, so obviously you'll want to choose medicinal mushrooms only. Nontoxic, beneficial varieties include shiitake, reishi, maitake, lion's mane, king trumpet, turkey tail, and himematsutake mushrooms. All mushrooms that are safe for people are safe for pets.

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 dog's meal, or try out my **mushroom broth recipe**.

13. **Pumpkin** — Fresh pumpkin, either steamed or boiled (or canned 100% pumpkin), is relatively low in calories and high in soluble fiber. **Pumpkin helps regulate bowel function**, which relieves both diarrhea and constipation. It's also an excellent source of potassium, vitamin A and antioxidants.
14. **Pumpkin seeds (raw)** — Pepitas or raw pumpkin seeds, are a rich source of minerals, vitamin K, and phytosterols. They also contain L-tryptophan and are a good source of zinc, vitamin E, and B vitamins. Research suggests pumpkin seeds can prevent calcium oxalate kidney stones, reduce inflammation caused by arthritis, and support prostate health.
15. **Raw nuts (almonds and Brazil nuts)** — These nuts, served in moderation and very small portions, are safe for dogs. Many nuts are not – especially tree nuts – so stick with these 2 to be on the safe side.
16. **Sardines** — Fish are a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids, which are essential to your dog's well-being. If you supplement your pet'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.
17. **Spinach** — This green leafy vegetable helps has anti-inflammatory properties and can help support heart health.
18. **Sweet potatoes** — Steamed sweet potatoes are rich in beta-carotene and antioxidants and are also high in vitamins A and C. Sweet potatoes with purple flesh have potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties that may lower the risk from heavy metals and oxygen radicals.
19. **Yogurt** — Plain organic yogurt is high in protein and calcium, and most pets love it.

Sources and References

^{1,3} [PetfoodIndustry.com, November 10, 2023](#)

² [Pet Product News, September 2023](#)
