

A Really Bad Idea for Households With Multiple Pets, No Matter the Reason Why

It's not very often I flat out say not to do something, but I've recently learned that some pet parents actually do this, perhaps out of convenience. It's one of the worst ideas for a number of reasons, which I explain here.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- While some owners of more than one dog feed them from the same bowl, it's a really bad idea
- When you use a shared food bowl, it's difficult to know how much each dog is eating. It's also difficult to control over- or under-eating
- A communal food bowl also means you can't feed your dogs a customized diet if necessary
- The biggest risk of a shared food bowl is interdog aggression at mealtime
- All dogs in the family should be fed from individual bowls, and in separate areas of the house

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It's possible I've been living under a rock, but I only recently became aware that apparently, more owners than I thought feed all their four-legged family members from the same food bowl. I'm not sure what the motivation for this practice might be, beyond perhaps the owner's convenience?

Whatever the intention, food bowl sharing in a multi-dog household is an exceptionally bad idea for a number of reasons.

3 Reasons Not to Feed Your Dogs From the Same Bowl

One reason is that if two or more dogs are fed from the same bowl, unless the owner is standing over them at every meal, he or she can't know how much each dog is eating.

It's important to monitor your dog's appetite as a sign of his general well-being. In fact, one of the first questions most veterinarians ask when you bring your pet in for an exam is, "How's he eating?" or "Have you noticed any change in his appetite?"

This is because food "input" and "outflow" are among the first things we investigate in assessing a pet's overall health.

Another reason to feed pets from their own bowls is to prevent a more dominant dog from eating his meal and then pushing others out of the way so he can help himself to their meals as well. Many animals over-consume calories if fed in the presence of other animals — it's almost a form of competitive eating.

This can quickly lead to obesity in a bossy dog and lack of adequate nourishment in the more **submissive dog** in the family. Shared food bowls also don't allow for individualized meals based on each dog's dietary needs.

For example, let's say you have two dogs and one of them has a **food sensitivity or allergy**. Do you make him eat the trigger food anyway because your other dog isn't sensitive to it, or do you deprive the other dog to avoid triggering a GI disturbance in your allergic dog? Clearly neither of these solutions is ideal.

Perhaps the biggest risk of a shared food bowl, though, is food aggression between dogs.

The Biggest Risk of a Shared Food Bowl

In a worst-case scenario, food aggression can result in injuries to a dog and/or an owner who tries to **break up a dogfight**. But before the "big event," there are usually a series of smaller skirmishes occurring at mealtime.

It's the nature of dogs to compete for resources, even when there are plenty of resources to go around. Dogs view many things as worth fighting for, including favorite toys, a special napping spot or "their" human. Food, of course, is a resource, and for many dogs it's the most important resource in their world.

This is especially true of high-value foods like recreational bones or extremely tasty treats. Veterinarian and animal behaviorist Dr. Sally Foote describes a common scenario at a food bowl shared by two dogs:

"What typically happens around a communal bowl is that dog No. 1 goes in to eat and keeps body blocking dog No. 2 away from the bowl. When dog No. 2 puts its head in the bowl, dog No. 1 will stare, growl and snarl.

No bite has happened yet. When dog No. 1 has its head down, you miss seeing the signs of aggression.

If dog No. 2 stands its ground, dog No. 1 will escalate. If dog No. 2 leaves, it will still go back to the bowl, often with another confrontation. Tensions escalate to the point of a fight. Often, these fights are severe because it is over an item for survival — food."¹

There are few things more upsetting for a dog parent than a fight that ends with bite wounds serious enough to require emergency veterinary and/or human medical care.

Dogs Prefer to Dine Alone

Dr. Foote suggests, and I certainly agree, that all dog housemates and even visiting dogs be fed from individual bowls in separate areas of the home. If you can't physically close them off from each other, constant supervision is your only option.

It's also a very good idea to pick up the bowls as soon as the dogs have eaten, because believe it or not, even empty bowls can trigger a problem. As Dr. Foote says, "Humans are the only species who want to eat together. Keep it separate and keep it safe."

The Safe Way to Offer Recreational Chews and Bones

When offering recreational chews or bones, it's of course important to scrutinize labels and feel comfortable with the quality and size of the product you offer your dogs.

It's also very important to moderate the time and frequency of chew-fests based on your pet's personality, health and the interrelationships among the dogs in a multi-dog household. Monitoring dog-to-dog interactions when offering bones and chews is very important.

The most coveted resource of the dogs in your house is almost always a favorite bone or chew. Never underestimate how protective a dog can become when another dog — or human — tries to take it ("steal" it).

If you're not sure how your dogs will react to the introduction of bones or chews, it's always best to physically separate them for chew-fests, either in their own individual crates, or in different rooms of the house or by putting one dog outside with his bone or chew while the other enjoys his inside. Remember to collect all the chews when you're finished supervising a chew session, and always supervise every chew session.

Sources and References

¹ [News Gazette, July 24, 2016](#)
