

The Forever Dog Life

A Special Interview With Rodney Habib

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Mr. Rodney Habib, welcome back to bark & whiskers. Great to have you.

Rodney Habib:

Well, thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Karen Becker:

We have a very exciting topic today, and one that I am involved with, so it's a little bit strange, but as your co-author, I am excited to discuss this project. I really am. Our first book, "The Forever Dog," was a tremendous amount of words and not a whole lot of pictures. In fact, that was one of the things that we got feedback on, was unbelievable information, life-changing, shifted everything, but where are all the beautiful pictures that they know and love you for? How did it feel to — this upcoming book, "The Forever Dog Life," how did it feel to have it be basically a four-color, beautiful, visual representation of the science behind "The Forever Dog," but in recipe format? What was it like to shoot an entire color photo book?

Rodney Habib:

Well, I can tell you it was extremely exhausting, but extremely gratifying at the same time. It's like the first book, "The Forever Dog," when that launched, it was the nerves, the jitters, all of those things. Then you're right, some of the feedback that we started to get on a book — the thing hit number one The New York Times bestseller. I didn't think I was on cloud nine. Then all of a sudden, "Hey man, where are all the wonderful pictures that you guys are known for?" This is — it's a way of us to appease all of those that know us for our content, our memes, our videos, and so on and so forth. These shots were taken in remote locations in different parts of the world where we would go travel and sit down with some of these extraordinary pet parents who've raised extraordinarily long-lived dogs.

It's a traveling tale. It's a food journey. Gosh, better home journey. It has been quite a task. But I got to tell you, none of this would've come together if you and Dr. Susan Recker didn't have to put in all of those human hours beforehand to assemble it on, so I could do the easy part and take the photography with Bea Adams obviously, and shoutout to Bea Adams.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Shoutout to your co-photographer, that's right. Dr. Recker and I were responsible for creating the nutritionally complete recipes, which is a lot of work. We have over 120 recipes in this book. I also love the fact that we have it divided into "healthy bodies" and "healthy homes." I'm going to have you talk about the healthy homes in a minute. But the healthy bodies part, Rodney, I think the biggest confusion about people wanting to home cook for their animals is, "I'm nervous about following a recipe." "I'm nervous that the recipe I'm following isn't complete," or "I don't believe in following recipes."

We had our work cut out for us putting together “European” and “AAFCO” (Association of American Feed Control Officials) nutrient-balanced recipes for puppies and kittens, two different recipes, adult dogs and cats, two more additional recipes, and then less-active dogs and cats, which is actually, I think, the largest population of animals in the U.S. are overweight or sedentary adult dogs and cats. We've covered all six of our bases with this recipe book. That was a task, not going to lie, that took a solid year. However, the thing I love, that I'm most excited about, in addition to offering all these amazing nutritionally complete recipes, different proteins, whole foods, supplements, different life stages, metabolic requirements, but the home section, I think everyone's question is, "Thanks for giving us the science about how to create healthy animals. Where do I start?" How did you start with the home and environment section, because that's like half the book?

Rodney Habib:

Well, it's interesting too because you say, "We showed the science," there's over 330 citations in this lifestyle book, right? The hardest part about assembling the book was first of all, what are we going to call it? What is it? It just seems weird even calling it a recipe book because it's way more than just that, right? First and foremost, before I go right into the home section, where did the word “life” come from? Now, you came up with a very creative first acronym for the first “The Forever Dog” book. No matter where I go, no matter what talk I see, somebody's always coming up and saying to me, "I am following the D-O-G-S strategy to a tee." But now you have a L-I-F-E strategy. I don't think very many people know what the word “life” or where even the word “life” came from. Before I jump into the home section, you want to explain quickly how you came up with L-I-F-E?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Sure. Well, to recap, bark & whiskers, those of you that have “The Forever Dog” book, that D-O-G-S was the easy way to summarize all of the concepts in book number one that you would want to do to make sure you're covering your bases on intentionally creating an exceptionally long-lived dog. It's diet, optimal movement, genetic predispositions and stress, is the D-O-G-S. Stress, meaning both environmental, physical, physiologic, emotional, mental and chemical stress in our world, environment and home. That was the easy way to remember key points. The L-I-F-E strategy is lifestyle, ideal microbiome. We know now, [the] science is quite clear that health and wellness begin in the gut. If our dogs and cats do not have a healthy gut, then they are not going to be metabolically or immunologically well. F is, of course, for food, and I was also really happy that we were able to give kitties, cats, as much shine in this book-

Rodney Habib:

Yes, finally.

Dr. Karen Becker:

-as — yeah, finally as our first book was dog heavy, actually dog exclusive. This book does a beautiful job of honoring cats. We have foods and foods also include treats, toppers, environmental enrichment categories, broth, stews, chews, everything that we would put into our kitty's or dog's mouth fall under F for food, and then environment and stress. We have to think about, there again, our home environment, the quality of our cleaning supplies, “What chemicals

are in our cleaning supplies?" "What's happening with our outdoor grass and turf?" That is included in that E section for this particular book.

Bouncing it back to you, what did you learn most about the how-to formula? The question, so many people's questions about, "Where do I go for the environmental part of this? Where do I go to?" In fact, I just saw you did a beautiful photoshoot today talking about yard chemicals and people are like, "Great, I'd love to not use chemicals in my yard. What do I use?" How did you come up with knowing what recipes and what to shoot to put in the environment section? There's a lot. We've got drain cleaners, stone countertop cleaners, wood cleaners, synthetic wood cleaners, cutting-board cleaners, weed killers, what else you got going on in that section?

Rodney Habib:

Well, first and foremost, thank you to science for making it very easy for us to follow the guideline that we were looking for in how to make the home less toxic, right? We've said this a million times. Dogs and cats spend the most time at home, more than you, the pet parent. You go to work, you go to yoga, you go out with your friends, you go to dinner, whatever the case may be. But your pets are typically at home the most. Therefore, if your home is toxic, guess who's bearing that burden? Research shows all of these different chemicals, all of these different types of forever chemicals, if you may. It's endless when you look at the things and these compounds that can harm the body when animals are being tested, when their urine is being tested and so on and so forth. That was an ideal way to start.

Okay, what are some of these things that we really need to look into? One study came out, recent, shows acrolein is a problem. Okay, how do we deal with acrolein? What are some of the things that you can do? This was really good for us when we brought in not only APH's (Agricultural Production & Handling) vegetables in the first book, which did a really good job at binding and removing acrolein from the body, but then we were talking about DIY (do it yourself) air purifiers.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes.

Rodney Habib:

This is something that might be so random for somebody that they're not thinking about, but air quality is so important within the home. All right, let's start right there. How do we clean up the air quality? What if you have no money? What if you have \$30, but you can't afford a thousand-dollar air purification system? Well, let us show you how to build one in under \$30. So, these are one of the important factors when going into this book was indoor and outdoor recipes, because it can come from both angles. It's not only inside the home, but it's also what's happening outside the home as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Well, and you sent me the study, recent study, that demonstrated that cats are some of the most victimized creatures in the world when it comes to body burden and chemical load. If you think about it, well-loved kitties, of course, we don't let them roam around outside. It's a huge risk, and most people don't walk their kitties to get fresh air and sunshine and get a break from whatever chemicals would be inside the home. But because of that, our poor, blessed cats are

actually some of the most toxic creatures on the planet and not by choice. Just cleaning up, making our houses green and learning how we can swap out chemical-based products for natural, chemical-free products is a massive breath of fresh air, literally, to our kitties. I am so thankful about that.

Dogs, however, outside, they do get walked, and that's wonderful. They do walk through chemicals. They do end up being exposed to a variety of different chemicals, but also in their food. I know you are a big proponent of helping to teach both dog and cat owners if you're not able to work up the clean scale of the actual food that you are putting in your animal's mouth, ideally, the best way to have control of diet is to make the diet yourself. We do have amazing, complete and balanced recipes for that. But can you talk a little bit about why it was so important to you?

You really were focused on making sure that in case people can't switch their food, they don't want to switch their food, but they still are looking for ways to minimize environmental contaminants in treats and the foods that they could be fitting, but also ways to increase polyphenols, antioxidants — how can they do what they can to improve the nutrition of their dog or cat, but maybe aren't ready to jump in and make complete and balanced homemade meals? What was your workaround for that particular issue?

Rodney Habib:

That's a moving scale throughout the entire book, right? I mean, you can look at this in so many different aspects. One, if you are a pet parent, as you say, who's feeding a balanced food, but let's say it's more on the ultra-processed food scale, and you're looking to level up, could you level up while the food was still balanced? That was one way we were able to address it, to keep your veterinarian happy, right? If you wanted to pull out, let's say, more than 10% science — when we wrote the original “The Forever Dog” book, and I remember having this conversation with board-certified veterinarian nutritionist, Dr. Donna Raditic, shoutout to Dr. Donna Raditic, that 10% rule, there's not really a solid foundation around that. This is like a guideline that board-certified nutritionists came up with. The 10% rule meaning if you had a balanced bowl of a specific type of pet food and then you started taking tablespoons and tablespoons out and putting tablespoons and tablespoons of something that maybe you want to start adding in there, at what point do you unbalance that food and get into some problems?

Step number one, let's make the highest echelon of minimally processed food as possible, meaning highest as imbalanced, highest as in rich in vitamins and minerals, and let's get those balanced recipes. If a pet owner wants to start and they want to venture more than the 10% rule, they can. Secondly, if, let's say they want to stay around the 10% rule, then we have a whole host of other types of recipes in the book where it's going to address different types of factors. Let's just say microbiome is an issue. Well, my favorite entire letter in that acronym in L-I-F-E is I for ideal microbiome. Holy moly, we really went all out here.

After reviewing over 10,000 gut microbiome reports of dogs and watching those foods work their magic, it was like 10 years in the making to select a lot of these foods that are packed with polyphenols, packed with fiber, packed with antioxidants, these foods, fiber-rich, gut microbiome-pleasing type of bioactive foods. Now we're adding them into the book where people can just add little teaspoons and just ramp up health in the immune system and so many other things. I'm so excited about it. You can see there's so many different directions we go in. But to go back to the original question that you asked is if people, let's say, don't want to go full

board don't want to jump into those balanced recipes, well then there's a whole host of chapters where you could be doing with broth. You could make the food better.

Teas, you could make the food better, treats, jerkies, it is endless, but it doesn't just stop at food and it doesn't just stop indoor/outdoor. We have another section, which is recipes for the body, and these are common ailments, as Dr. Steve Marsden would say, the toolbox that you have at home that you can reach into. Obviously, if you have big problems, you want to go see your veterinarian, but if you have got these, how do you say them, quick, little home hacks that you could have, like your own personal medicine cabinet for your dog. We have a giant section on that.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. That's one of the things that I'm appreciative and just making some of these recipes myself, not just a homemade ear cleaner, homemade toothpaste, homemade shampoo — wonderful. But so much money to be saved. I love the fact that so many of these recipes, in fact, the DIY laundry detergent is pennies per load. We just made a batch yesterday, mama Becker and I, and she said, "It's the best-smelling," of course, all naturally such. She said, "My entire house smells amazing, and it's all-natural. For under 10 bucks, I can do wash all year." We're saving money. But it's also so wonderful to know that by you making these products yourself, you know exactly what's in them. You also know what date you made them.

That's the cool thing about making the treats and toppers as well. People say, "Listen, I'm really nervous about sourcing. I'm nervous about where does the meat come from or the treats that I'm feeding." You don't know. If you make the foods and treats yourself or your home-cleaning products you do know, and you can use whatever raw materials best resonates for you and your animals, and I love that. It gives you full control, but also full confidence in knowing what exactly your animals are exposed to.

Rodney Habib:

For me, I'm excited about so many things about this book because obviously as you get started in the beginning part, the early chapter of the journey, that's going to highlight kitchen essentials, things that you, as a pet parent, might want to consider, things to know about food first beforehand, maybe how to select food, the benefits, maybe, of non-sprayed foods and so on and so forth. But then it goes into storage containers, for instance, what you may be looking for if you're going to buy something in the storage section. Then we have a giant section, if you just wanted to choose one food, we chose five of — no, we have many favorite foods, but we chose five of our favorite multi-use foods that there can be.

These foods, bar none, according to so many longevity scientists when we interviewed them — I love that question, "If you were on an island and you could only take a few food items with you, what would they be?" These five, hands down, bar none, were like herbalists, longevity scientists. They were like, "These would be on my top five list." Those are in the book as well, which is very exciting. But what makes this unique and the questions that you and I have been getting for over a decade is, "I just want to make food at home for my dog, but I have no idea how. I just don't know how to do it," right?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes.

Rodney Habib:

The combinations that we have now, we have our incredible data team. These guys are literally assembling a website that is going to be so advanced where you'll be able to go in the book, you'll be able to find a recipe that you want into the book, and it doesn't stop there because when you take it onto the website, you can get over 400 different combinations if you start merging them with the recipes. It's absolutely insane.

But you want to talk a little bit about the balanced recipes themselves. We've had the help of board-certified veterinarians. We have microbiologists that even got involved when formulating some of the other recipes, but back to the balanced recipes for a moment. These are not only so unique, but they are tastes of the world. The recipes that we found when we sat down with these pet parents who had these extraordinarily long-lived dogs that inspired us with some of these recipes. You know how many different countries we have? There's going to be so many people in so many different parts of the world that are going to be so pumped when they open this up and they're like, "Oh my gosh, I got a recipe from my country."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, I think what's so inspiring to me is research shows that getting out of our comfort zone of what we're always offering, either what our bodies, in terms of treats and foods, we tend to have favorite foods, and we just eat those over and over. Research is pretty clear about how to diversify, build and make your dog or cat's microbiome more resilient. The number one way to do that is to introduce new foods with new prebiotic fibers. But there's also — every food has its own unique set of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, polyphenols, flavonoids. Using just one bite at a time, you can begin working on that ideal microbiome. What I love is so many of these recipes coming from different countries with different flavors, and most importantly, I think different spices and herbs that are already in your spice drawer. You just never use them.

Rodney Habib:

Yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's such a cheap and easy way to triple the antioxidant load. I am really excited about that. When we had our board-certified veterinary nutritionist review the recipes, Donna, one of the doctors said to me, "It's so wonderful you are incorporating all of these spices and herbs that are already in our homes, but just no one ever uses them." It is such a lovely way for us to really help expand the microbiome and the nutrient intake of dogs and cats around the world. Now, Rodney, people's biggest question is, "I can't feed raw. I don't want to feed raw. I just — no. I'm just not." What else is going on in terms of you taking photos? You're taking some photos of some Crockpot recipes?

Rodney Habib:

Yeah, so look, we are trying to cater to everybody here, right? Food philosophies are like religion, and we have to understand that there's the massive parts of the world, you and I are massive fans of minimally processed foods and where you fall onto on that scale. But there's a massive subset of pet parents out there, newbies, beginners, and so on and so forth that man, thinking about raw food is too intense for them. Obviously, our audience is like, "Listen, we know that — is this book all raw food? I want to buy the book, but I'm unsure what other options of cooking you're giving me."

This book is so unique, it's going to give you four different types of cooking strategies when you want to make some of these balanced recipes. Obviously, if you don't want to cook it, guess what? There's an option there for you. If you're one who says, "I like to use my oven, I like to bake." There's an option there for you. If you're one who says, "I like to use a Crockpot," there's an option there for you. We have, I believe, four different options. I think poached, too, is one of the options.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, so gently cooked, poaching. That's my favorite way to cook. Obviously, as a fresh-feeding, raw-feeding veterinarian, I love raw food, but yes, poaching is my favorite way. If you're going to either — if you're immunocompromised, your animal does better on cooked food, a lot of older animals just plain do better on cooked food. Poaching is the best way to maintain those nutrients, keep AGEs (advance glycation end products) low and provide this flavorful, canned food, warm consistency.

We have nutritionally complete, poached recipes as well. The cool thing I like is this is the first cookbook in the world, ever, ever, ever, to take into account nutrient losses due to cooking method. When you look at the nutritional complete analysis between the raw version, the gently cooked, the Crockpot and the baked, those are four nutritional analyses. You'll see different amounts of those ingredients to add because we have taken into account cooking method. I think that, I'm pretty sure this is the only, according to the nutritionists that reviewed the cookbook, they're like, "Oh my gosh, no one has done that." But I'm really happy that we have because cooking matters and heat matters, and we want the nutrients to be adjusted for that.

Rodney Habib:

Well, let me say this, too. What's really exciting about a lot of these recipes and people are already experiencing in them online from these little reels that we keep sharing, a lot of these recipes are for you and your dog or cat, right?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, yeah.

Rodney Habib:

There's something very — I have a ritual here in my home, and me and Shubi go to eat. We're together. I've had it my whole life with my dogs. We always ate together like a family, especially if you're a single dog mom or dog dad, and you have that moment with you and your dog, you

come home, you want to share that meal. These meals, you too can eat some of the recipes, some of the soups. How about longevity root vegetable stew?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Oh my gosh, so good.

Rodney Habib:

That exploded on the internet and everybody started making it, started posting it, started tagging us on reels and started tagging us in stories. It was absolutely unbelievable. But that's the exciting part about these recipes. Man, they're not only good for your dog, but they're good for your microbiome, too, as well. The uniqueness of some of these recipes that maybe no one's seen before, I can tell you one that's gone crazy right now around the world and everybody's sending photos is your collagen ball that-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Oh, collagen balls. Yes.

Rodney Habib:

That took social media by storm because people were like — people thought they were Saturday Night Live skits. They were like, "What on earth are we looking at here? This is the most unique thing." If you think that was unique, just wait until you start going through some of these. They are so fun. They are so creative. I'm just excited when people get ahold of these because I know that my DMs are never going to be the same again. People are going to be sending me photos of all the incredible things they make.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, June 4th.

Rodney Habib:

June 4th.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It is out June 4th. Pre-orders available now, anywhere where you buy books, we try and really help people support local independent bookstores. But of course, it's available at all retailers, bulk, mass, online. I am excited, Rodney — if you could think of, when I think about the most important reason for me why it's important to get this information out, it's that so many people are afraid to home prepare anything for their animal. They're just afraid they're going to do it wrong. Above all, they think it's going to take a lot of time. They think it's going to be confusing, and they're afraid that their veterinarian's going to, or themselves, are going to say, "Oh my gosh, what if I do it wrong?" This book removes food fears, period. We can meet people where they're at by one tiny step at a time. That's my biggest relief and my point of gratitude for this particular book. How about you?

Rodney Habib:

First book was listed as a contemporary classic, according to Harper Collins, a book that, if you don't know what that means, it's basically a book that shifts culture, 22 languages globally, around the world. That, I don't think could be topped for me. But now there's this next book, and this one for me is going to be to change perception. Because for a lot of people, ultra-processed food is the reality because they don't know any better. As you just alluded to, food fears, you can't go online right now today and read that broccoli is bad for your dog. Nuts are bad for your dog, culinary mushrooms, there's so many food myths that when pet parents and new pet parents coming up start seeing all these photos being splashed all over the place, that changes their perception that, "Hey, maybe food doesn't have to look like pellets for dogs and cats."

That, in turn, is going to have such a global, massive ripple effect in the fact that we are literally going to watch health span and lifespan shift in a positive way. That's my excitement. Pet parents know this, preorder, preorder, preorder. We talk about it all the time.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's true.

Rodney Habib:

The reason we talk about it is our first book sold out in 90 seconds all over the world, the second it came out, sold out in every bookstore, sold out everywhere that you can imagine. This is an opportunity for you to secure your copy, because when you preorder beforehand, you don't have to worry. You've got your ticket and your number in line. You're actually not even charged until the book is delivered and sent to you. It's just getting your spot in the lineup. We just don't want to see how many disappointed people the first go-around happen the second go-around.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I think they are anticipate potentially selling out, which is amazing. I don't think you and I, we had no idea the first book, it would be gone. The entire stock was gone, and then it took them months to get it back in. That was wildly upsetting-

Rodney Habib:

Well, it has nothing to do with us. I think a lot of people think that we sell the books.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes.

Rodney Habib:

Harper Collins is one of the biggest publishing houses in the world. We are just spectators like you are. We just sit back and we watch and we're just like, "Oh, wow," so very important.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Very important and an important thing if you want to make sure that you are capable of getting this information, I agree. So, June 4th, that's out. I am so excited. I'm looking forward to doing a

follow-up interview with you to see when this is all done. I know, I think you're shooting DIY mosquito spray today or something, right? Tick spray, something.

Rodney Habib:

Yeah. Shooting DIY mosquito spray and a pest flea/tick.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Nice.

Rodney Habib:

Prevention spray, so pretty excited about that as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I like it. Yeah, I like that. I'm excited to follow up with you just to see how all the, I know you're really producing a tremendous amount of content right now, trying to bring awareness and giving away a bunch of free recipes. I'm looking forward to talk to you after June 4th because you have done the heavy lifting for this book. I appreciate all that you're doing, and I know you're going to go right back to shooting when we're done. Thanks for spending a few minutes here with bark & whiskers giving us a little bit behind the scenes heads up on what's going on. I can't wait to touch base with you again soon.

Rodney Habib:

All right. I too am very excited and I can't wait, pet parents, to see how this how-to manual is going to inspire you to be better and to know better.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Thanks, Rodney.