

Has Your Vet Told You to Do This? Be Very Careful

It's time for a large dose of skepticism if your vet advises this. There can be a whole lot of conflict of interest. Plus, it's not a subject vets are very keen on and knowledgeable about anyway.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many conventional veterinarians dislike discussing pet diets with their clients — probably because they receive very little information about animal nutrition in veterinary school
- The veterinary industry is trying to encourage vets to conduct nutritional assessments on their patients, because many pet owners are confused, concerned and searching online for information
- There are very few practicing board-certified veterinary nutritionists, and many have close ties to processed pet food manufacturers, making their advice and recommendations questionable
- Many holistic and integrative veterinarians are well-informed about species-appropriate nutrition and can help you customize a balanced diet for your pet that falls within your budget

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Have you ever had a conversation with your veterinarian about **your pet's diet**? If you take your dog or cat to a conventional veterinary practice, the answer may well be "no." If you've never heard a peep from your vet about nutrition, you may be wondering why. The fact is, many traditional vets absolutely loathe talking about nutrition with pet parents.

This is extremely unfortunate, because nutrition is the foundation of good (or poor) health for our animal companions. It's my passion and one of the very first things I discuss with every client.

The Reason Your Vet Doesn't Discuss Your Pet's Diet

As a result of the hesitance of the conventional veterinary community to talk about pet diets, there are lots of articles in veterinary journals addressing the topic. A typical headline is the one I'm looking at right now:

"Nutrition leaving a bad taste in YOUR mouth? You may find diet discussions distasteful ..."¹

This particular article takes the point of view that if veterinarians don't counsel their clients about what food their pets should eat, those clients will consult "Dr. Google" instead, and follow the dietary advice of various online kooks and whackos. While I agree there's a lot of bad information about pet diets on the Internet, the fact is, the vast majority of conventional veterinarians also lack knowledge about dog and cat nutrition, which is driving owners to look elsewhere for advice.

Because nutrition isn't viewed as an integral part of disease management (unless the pet is having a GI problem), many vet students graduate not recognizing the monumental role nutrition plays in overall health. They don't have enough knowledge to institute innovative nutritional protocols to manage degenerative disease in their patients.

Because many vets only address food when there appears to be a problem with it, many clients looking to use nutrition as a starting point for managing disease feel they aren't getting the information they need from their family vet. The endless questions clients have about food, coupled with many veterinarians' lack of knowledge about the topic, becomes annoying for all sides, and the end result is many vets avoid the topic all together.

Worse still is that at many of the veterinary schools in North America, the instruction vet students DO receive comes from the biggest pet food producers in the business. Needless to say, the "training" the students receive from these companies is heavily slanted in favor of the products they sell, which are inevitably highly processed. Currently, none of the major pet food companies sell biologically appropriate diets, so these foods are portrayed as dangerous.

What About Veterinary Nutritionists?

Veterinary nutritionists receive a diploma from the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN). They are DVMs who go on to become board-certified in veterinary nutrition. The additional training they receive runs at least two years and they must pass a written exam at the end of their coursework to obtain board certification.

Unfortunately, the majority of board-certified veterinary nutritionists have also been schooled primarily about processed pet diets, and believe it or not, major pet food manufacturers frequently pay the tuition for DVMs studying to become veterinary nutritionists.

The ACVN is the smallest of the veterinary colleges and there are only around 115 veterinary nutritionists in the world. They work in veterinary schools, government agencies, pet drug companies, private animal hospitals, for themselves, and very frequently, for pet food companies.

So when a veterinary nutritionist recommends X, Y or Z food — or discourages feeding raw or homemade diets, which is common — keep in mind that many practicing veterinary nutritionists are obligated in some way to a pet food manufacturer. This association creates an obvious conflict of interest when it comes to the advice they offer, which is typically to encourage pet owners to stick with big-name processed pet foods for the lifelong "health" of their four-legged family members.

It's important to note that pet food companies rarely study dogs and cats throughout their lives to collect long-term health data on the animals eating their products. In addition, the traditional veterinary community carefully avoids making connections between sick pets and their diets unless the sickness appears immediately following the introduction of a new diet.

Seldom mentioned by the traditional veterinary community (and never by big pet food companies) is that pet dogs and cats acquire diseases their counterparts in the wild do not. Clearly one of the biggest differences between house pets and wild canines and felines is the food they eat.

The biggest risks (and causes of death) for wild felids and canids are environmental, including starvation, habitat loss, poaching and hunting. The biggest risks (and causes of death) for domestic dogs and cats are lifestyle-induced degenerative diseases often rooted in nutritional mismanagement. This is a risk wild animals don't contend with.

Deciding on the Right Diet for Your Dog or Cat

If you're wondering what diet would be best for your own pet and don't find your current veterinarian's suggestions helpful, I encourage you to try to find an **integrative or holistic vet** in your area who is knowledgeable about animal nutrition.

Holistic vets are often very well-informed about species-appropriate nutrition and can help you customize a diet and supplement protocol based on your pet's individual and dynamically changing needs. The goal should be to mimic the ancestral diet of your pet as closely as possible, but also stay within your budget.

My standard recommendation is to feed your pet as much unprocessed, fresh food as you can afford. Depending on your financial means, this could be an all-fresh, living and **raw food diet** — or simply some fresh food snacks instead. Research shows that offering SOME healthy foods is better than none.

Another approach could be to feed your pet two to four fresh food meals a week. Or do a 50/50 split, meaning one meal a day is a processed pet food, and the other is a fresh food meal. The important thing is to start taking small steps toward providing the best diet you can afford for your dog or cat.

My Top 4 Diet Recommendations

1. Hands down, my favorite diet for healthy pets is a nutritionally balanced raw homemade diet. Raw, unadulterated food contains all of the enzymes and phytonutrients that are typically destroyed during food processing.

However, it's very important not to use guesswork in choosing the nutrients your pet needs when preparing meals at home. Unbalanced homemade diets can cause a variety of serious health problems, especially in growing animals. That's why it's critically important that you insure your homemade diet is balanced.

Veterinary nutritionists (and many functional medicine vets like myself) find the most flaws with home prepared meals. We regularly see well-intentioned pet parents who are striving to improve the quality of their pet's diet having to deal with the unintended consequences of creating nutritional imbalances, which can manifest as disease.

In an attempt to improve their pet's health they unknowingly feed unbalanced, human-grade, organic foods that ultimately do not improve overall health. Balanced homemade food gives you the flexibility to include a lot of nutritional variety in your pet's diet. You can buy seasonal fruits and veggies on sale. You can use produce that comes from your local supermarket, your local farmer's market or even from your own garden.

2. My second favorite option is a nutritionally balanced cooked homemade diet that gives you all of the benefits of the homemade raw diet, minus the enzymes and phytonutrients found in living foods.

You might want to cook your pet's meals if your furry companion simply prefers cooked over raw food, or warm food over chilled food. Also, some pet parents prefer to cook the food. In addition, there are some medical conditions such as recent GI surgery or pancreatitis for which cooked food is a better idea.

3. Number three is a commercially available balanced raw food diet. This is NOT one of the diets that says, "For supplemental or intermittent feeding" on the label, but a balanced, nutritionally COMPLETE diet. These diets are usually found in the freezer section of small or privately owned pet stores. Some big-box stores are now

starting to carry a larger selection of frozen raw diets, and you can also find an excellent selection online.

The downside to this choice is the cost — you're paying for the luxury of having someone else do the work for you. As with all pet food manufacturers, you'll need to investigate the company you're buying from to make sure you're feeding the correct product for your pet's specific nutritional and medical goals.

4. Number four is a dehydrated or freeze-dried raw diet. If you can't or don't want to feed fresh raw food, a good alternative is a dehydrated freeze-dried raw diet that is reconstituted with water. These diets are shelf-stable (so no longer raw, even though many of them still make this claim) so they're very convenient.

Dehydrated or freeze-dried raw diets haven't been processed at high temperatures. In many cases, the nutrient value has been retained minus a balanced fatty acid profile. Make sure the brand you select is nutritionally balanced for growth, adult or all life stages.

Sources and References

¹ [dvm360, May 3, 2016](#)
