

IS HOMEMADE BETTER?

Before you fire up the stove for your dog's next meal, read this

BY KATE PARHAM

WANT TO THROW TOGETHER DINNER FOR FIDO?

Think twice: Homemade diets are not always in your pooch's best interest.

An animal's nutritional needs are complex, which means those looking to cook their pets meals at home need to be extra careful. Even the most loving owners can cook something for their pets that lacks in minerals and vitamins. Subpar nutrition can have "dramatic and detrimental consequences, particularly during growth stages," says Andrea Fascetti, professor of nutrition at the University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

The most critical times for pets to have a balanced diet are during growth stages, gestation and lactation. Calcium deficiencies, a common problem among home-fed pets, can result in fractures, lameness, pain when walking, and even paralysis. If you feed your pet raw food, you also risk contaminating their bodies with harmful bacteria.

Another issue is spoilage, says Patricia A. Schenck, author of *Home-Prepared Dog and Cat Diets*. "Home-prepared diets are wet and contain no preservatives, so they need to be consumed in a short period of time and not left out at room temperature," she says.

Food you can buy at the store is normally quite good for your pooch. "Most pet food manufacturers are diligent in seeking out good-quality ingredients,

performing quality control and feeding trials to ensure that the products being produced meet the nutritional needs of pets," says Mindy Bough, vice president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' (ASPCA) Animal Poison Control Center. She often recommends commercial pet food products from high-quality brands, like those offered in veterinary offices and pet supply stores, for their nutritional benefits, convenience and cost.

"Commercial diets are prepared by people who have a Ph.D. in, say, cat nutrition and food science. That's what they do for a living," says Tony Buffington, professor in the department of veterinary clinical sciences at Ohio State University. "Not too many people making homemade diets have that level of qualification."



"People with the time and initiative [to make their own pet food] are doing it out of devotion. It can create a much stronger bond between owner and animal, and the love and attention that goes into homemade diets can be a valuable part of environmental enrichment."

Tony Buffington, professor in the department of veterinary clinical sciences at The Ohio State University

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If you are set on making dinner for doggie, follow this advice to keep him at his best.

► Talk to your vet about your pet's nutritional needs. "When we make a recommendation for pet food, we think about the animal, who they are, what life stage they're in, their age, any medical problems, weight and body condition," says Fascetti. "And we talk to the owner and get input from them on their particular feeding philosophies—some owners feel strongly about providing an organic diet—and the environment the animal is in." Taking all of those factors into consideration will help you determine which diet is best for your pet.

► Use a recipe created or approved by a veterinary nutritionist to ensure the diet contains the appropriate nutrients.

► Don't make any substitutions in the vet-approved diet. Make sure to use all recommended ingredients, and make sure Rover is eating them.

► Have your pet evaluated by the vet twice yearly to ensure there are no nutritional deficiencies developing, says Schenck.

► Never use foods that may be harmful to pets, like chocolate, alcohol or milk. Visit aspc.org for a list of potentially harmful foods.

Buying food the best way

Many pet owners will read the ingredient list on a food package to determine if the food provides good nutrition. However, that list can be very deceiving, and companies can play games with the rules, says Dr. Tony Buffington. He suggests instead, looking for nutritional claims verified by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). The agency uses nutrient analysis and feeding trials to make sure a product's label is truthful.

If you do want to try to analyze the ingredients list, Schenck recommends looking for a dry protein source, like chicken meal, as one of the first ingredients. "If a wet source of protein is the first ingredient, such as whole chicken, which is heavy with water, then I like to see another source of protein high on the list."

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Tony Buffington, professor in the department of veterinary clinical sciences at The Ohio State University

Recipe from Patricia A. Schenck's Home-Prepared Dog and Cat Diets



FOR AN ADULT DOG:

- 4 oz boneless chicken breast, roasted without skin
- 2 cups cooked white rice
- 1 tbs canola oil
- 1/2 tsp potassium chloride
- 2 tsp bone meal powder
- 3/4 tsp iodized salt
- 1 tablet children's multi-vitamin (make sure it does not contain xylitol)
- 1/2 of a 100 mg zinc tablet

Mix the food ingredients together, then add the vitamin immediately before serving. The vitamin can be crushed for better distribution through the food. This recipe provides approximately 726 calories for your dog.

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