

## CBC MARKETPLACE: HEALTH » PET FOOD

The raw dog food debate

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The pet food debate goes beyond the question of "do I feed my pooch dry or wet, regular or premium pet food?"

It's a question of philosophy.

Patti's a Norwich Terrier, small and cute. She has a nice leash, nice toys, nice food bowls.



*'Beauty' likes bones*

The Norwich Terrier was bred to be a hunter of small animals, but Patti isn't that right now.

Her owner, Heather Topp, feeds Patti a strict diet of kibble — a cup a day.

Marla Katz, on the other hand, feeds her Rottweiler, Beauty, a diet based on raw vegetables, meat and bones.

Katz says when she got Beauty, she was sick. The dog had dandruff and worms. The raw diet, she says, turned Beauty's health around.

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The best-known version of the raw diet is called the BARF diet. Short for Bones And Raw Food. Pet owners and raw food makers encourage each other and share information over the Internet.

Kim Thomson manufactures "The Ultimate Diet" for raw pet food devotees who don't have the time to make it themselves. To design her product, Kim thought like a wild dog.

"What would a dog catch in the wild? The perfect sort of size for a dog in the wild would be a rabbit. And I took a rabbit apart, basically. There's a certain amount of stomach, which has the vegetables and the grains. There's a certain amount of bone. There's a certain amount of meat."



*"The evidence is anecdotal," says John Hilton, expert in small animal nutrition*

Raw cuts vet bills: advocates

You can't buy frozen raw food at big pet supply marts and supermarkets. Manufacturers like Hills Science Diet, Purina and Iams fill the shelves.

Raw food advocates concede the diet costs more than traditional dog food, but they argue it's worth it.

Keiley Abbat, a dietary consultant at a small pet boutique, is an advocate of the raw diet. She says it may cost more, but it saves on trips to the vet.

"It's \$100 a month versus \$20 month for 40 pounds (of traditional dog food). Premium is \$40 to \$50 for 40 pounds. But raw saves on vet visits. After detox, you don't have to see a vet anymore except for annual check ups."

John Hilton, an expert in small animal nutrition and vice-president of research and development at Veterinary Medical Diets, a Canadian pet food company, spoke to *Marketplace* as a representative of the pet food industry.

"The evidence is anecdotal. I haven't seen any scientific basis for it...Bones present a particular problem, particularly chicken bones. They can still stick in the throat whether they're cooked or not."

Salmonella, E. coli among potential problems

Hilton says there are other potential problems as well, including salmonella and E. coli. He notes the findings of a recent study that found that 10 to 50 per cent of chicken has salmonella. Not good for the pet or the people preparing the food.

Ian Buffett is an alternative veterinarian who makes house calls. He is one of a small percentage of vets who don't believe processed food is that good for pets.

"I just think you can't get the same quality of food out of a bag of commercial food that you can if you do it yourself, picking the ingredients yourself, making it yourself and serving it fresh. The biggest...benefit of commercial foods is just the convenience of it."



*"The biggest benefit of commercial foods is...convenience," says Ian Buffett, alternative vet*

Most veterinarians are not supporters.

"What concerns me most is that people are trusting a diet that is not formulated by a nutritionist, has not had any scientific study, has not had ... field trials," Heather Hanna told *Marketplace*.

But Ian Buffett, doesn't believe the field trials done by pet food manufacturers mean better nutrition.

"They have to do the processing, they have to put the preservatives in, and the food's been sitting on the shelf for a few months. So there's just no way they can get the same quality of food into the pet."

Buffett adds that diets other than those manufactured by large pet food companies, don't get a fair shake at vet school.

"Mostly," he says, "we were taught by representatives of the pet food companies."

The veterinary colleges we spoke with said there is a shortage of vets who specialize in small animal nutrition. When there's nobody qualified on staff, nutritionists from the pet food companies are asked to teach it. But they aren't interested in raw diets, so students don't learn about them.

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