

Raw food diets gain popularity with dog owners



In 1993, Australian veterinarian Ian Billinghurst published the book *Give Your Dog a Bone: The Practical Commonsense Way to Feed Dogs for a Long Healthy Life*. His subsequent book in 2000, *The BARF Diet: Raw Feeding for Dogs and Cats Using Evolutionary Principles*, kicked the raw food trend into high gear (BARF stands for Bones and Raw Food). Billinghurst recommends a diet of 50 percent raw meat/50 percent organs, and bones, eggs, fruits, and vegetables.

Why raw? Canines in the wild eat the whole animal: meat, bones, and organs. Cooking diminishes the natural nutrients and live enzymes, leaving little in nutritional value. Most commercially processed pet food contains extra carbohydrates added from grains and potatoes, which are hard for dogs to digest and cause their bodies to overproduce insulin, which makes them store food as fat. Feeding raw gives dogs firmer and smaller stools, better digestion, fewer allergies, healthier skin, coat, and teeth, and a more balanced weight.

But for the average pet owner, this back-to-basics approach isn't as easy as it sounds. Luckily, *Dogs Naturally Magazine* provides an excellent online source written by Dana Scott, the magazine's founder and CEO, for rawist newbies:

Raw Feeding Primer: 10 Simple Rules to Get Started
(www.dogsnaturallymagazine.com/raw-feeding-primer).

Uncooked Eats

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
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Scott recommends feeding two to three percent of a dog's ideal adult weight per day. Her meal plans consist of raw muscle meat, 12 to 15 percent bone for calcium and phosphorus, 10 to 30 percent organ meats for vitamins, and 5 percent fruits and veggies for fiber and taste.

There are some drawbacks to preparing your dog's raw meals yourself. It takes time and planning, and is not as convenient as using kibble. Sometimes it's downright impractical, as when you board or travel with your pet. Then there's the risk of bacterial contamination -- mostly for humans who handle the uncooked meat, bones, and organs. (Dogs' intestines are more acidic and much shorter than in humans and have a less chance of infection from Salmonella, E. coli, and Listeria.)

If slinging raw turkey necks, chicken hearts, and beef tail bones isn't possible or even desirable, but you still want the health benefits of feeding raw, you should consider the commercially available raw diets.

Dog Food Advisor (www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/raw-dog-food) has a list of 41 suggested raw dog foods provided by 27 different pet food companies. These foods are offered in raw frozen and freeze-dried forms, and are recommended by Dog Food Advisor for their balanced diets of muscle meat plus bone, organ meat, vegetables, fruits, eggs, and fish/shell fish.

Many of these products are slightly cooked, however, so check out their processing before you buy. Mary's LB in North Miami carries several of these recommended products by Stella & Chewy, Primal, and Vital Essentials.

It's important to note that raw diets are not appropriate for all dogs. Consult your veterinarian before beginning this kind of feeding program. Some vets don't recommend a raw diet for puppies, as they need large amounts of calcium for healthy bone growth. Dogs with certain conditions or diseases are discouraged from eating raw -- for example, dogs with pancreas issues need low fat foods.

There are no vitamin/mineral standards established for raw diets. The National Research Council guidelines are based on a dry dog food diet only. When switching to raw, *slowly* incorporate new foods into the dog's existing diet in order to prevent digestive issues.

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Rigo's Meal (www.rigosmeal.com) is a Weston-based raw dog food company with a line of products sold at 19 different farmers markets in South Florida. Along the Biscayne Corridor, their dog food is sold at Brickell City Centre Farmers Market on Saturdays and Miami Shores Farmers Market held on Sundays in Optimist Park.

Business owner Mayi started Rigo's Meal only 18 months ago and is already searching for a larger facility to accommodate the company's growth. Her pet foods are based on the BARF diet. They are the rare commercial raw foods that are truly *not* cooked and are made with human-grade ingredients from mostly local vendors.

Showcasing her products at farmers markets is her selling secret. Mayi tells the *BT*: "It's important for us to contact and educate customers directly." She offers beef and turkey meatballs, but will soon introduce chicken products as well.

A package of 16 frozen raw Rigo's Meal turkey meatballs (2.4 pounds) costs \$13; 16 frozen raw beef meatballs cost \$15. Mayi throws in a free box of seven turkey meatballs for new customers. For a 15-pound dog eating raw beef, Rigo's Meal recommends feeding three to four meatballs a day, which comes out to about \$3.75 per day. Large dogs require more meatballs, but Mayi offers free delivery for orders over \$90.

Janet Goodman is a Miami Shores-based dog trainer and principal of Good Dog Bad Dog Inc. Contact her at info@gooddogbaddogmiami.com.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com