

RAW FOOD DIETS

By

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Food fights are taken seriously in the pet industry. On the one side are the traditional pet food products – a meal in a bag or a can. On the other are the raw food advocates who argue passionately about the benefits of feeding raw meat and bones to dogs and cats – benefits such as better skin and coat, elimination of mouth and body odor, and the vague, but ever-popular, enhanced immune function.

Advocates even claim that raw meat can prevent or cure chronic diseases such as arthritis and diabetes and the skin diseases that bedevil veterinarians. Recipes for home made raw diets abound on the internet, and an increasing number of entrepreneurs are offering commercial versions.

Regardless of the merits of these claims, a recent study published by the *Canadian Veterinary Journal* has raised concern about the dangers of raw meat diets – **danger not only for animals but for people as well.**

The *University of Guelph* study found that every one of the commercial raw food diets they tested was contaminated with potentially disease-producing bacteria.

The researchers, Weese, Rousseau and Arroyo, tested 25 diets from eight different manufacturers in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Every sample tested contained fecal coliform bacteria. The average level of contamination was 800 times higher than the maximum allowable level set by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Sixty-four percent of the coliforms were E. coli.

The kind of meat in the diets did not seem to matter. Beef, chicken, and lamb were the most common meat source. Some were more exotic – quail, goose, buffalo, rabbit or venison – but all harbored potential pathogens.

In addition to the coliforms, they also found salmonella in 20 per cent of the diets. A number of other disease producing bacteria were detected, including *Clostridium difficile*, the organism that was present in antibiotic-resistant outbreaks in Quebec hospitals earlier this year.

Although raw food advocates will argue that dogs and cats are resistant to these bacteria, **there is no evidence to support this view**. There is lots of evidence, however, that shows that dogs and cats do fall ill when they ingest contaminated food.

But pets are not the only ones at risk. People handling and preparing the food also come into contact with the potentially harmful bacteria. Most commercially available raw diets are sold as frozen portions. In the process of thawing, preparing and feeding, the raw food can contaminate hands, utensils, counters and food bowls.

Some animals can become carriers, shed the bacteria in their stool, and pass it on to other pets or people. An earlier Canadian study found that the salmonella present in raw pet food prepared by pet owners in their own kitchens showed up in the feces of their dogs.

The average home is not a sterile laboratory; it is an ideal environment for the proliferation of these bacteria. The risk of transmission between people and pets is a real concern. At greatest risk are the people and animals with the weakest defences – the very young, the old, and those on medication. While the healthy individual may get no more than a case of diarrhea, others may develop a life-threatening illness.

For those who insist on feeding raw meat, the authors recommend certain precautions. Unconsumed raw food should be promptly discarded and not allowed to sit in bowls. All surfaces should be disinfected daily with a 10 percent bleach solution (one part bleach to nine parts water). And of course frequent hand washing is important after contact with food and pets.

It sounds like a lot of work and not much fun. As the authors conclude, **“Given these safety concerns, and the absence of any scientific data indication beneficial health effects of raw diets...it is difficult to recommend their use at this point.”**

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