

Bin the bones

Bones are a natural food for dogs... aren't they? Vet **Jenny Moffett** explains why you should think twice before feeding those Christmas turkey leftovers to your dog.

There has been growing support in recent years for feeding a 'bones and raw food' diet to dogs. Advocates of this diet say that is the 'natural' option and that a plateful of vegetables and meat such as raw chicken wings is the healthiest meal for their pet. However, most vets have plenty of horror stories about removing shards of bones from sick dogs' tummies. So, we must ask ourselves: "Bones - to feed or not to feed: that is the question."

What the supporters of a 'bones and raw food' (often shortened to the rather charming acronym 'BARF') diet are saying seems like common sense. Dogs have evolved from wild ancestors that lived on little more than the meat, skin and bone from prey animals. These wild dogs also fed on the partially digested vegetation found in the stomachs of their plant-eating prey. By that rationale, a selection of raw meat and vegetables would seem a most appropriate diet for the wild dog's domestic descendant. Why, ask the BARF supporters, would you want to feed your pets tinned food and processed kibble?

But here is where the difficulty lies – is 'natural' always necessarily good? It is natural for a dog to have litter after litter of puppies – but is that right? It is natural for a dog to devour a rotting bird carcass in one gulp – but how is that healthy for him?

Cooked bones are bad news

When it comes to feeding bones there are many health risks to take into consideration. Cooked bones are particularly bad news. With cooked mutton bones, for example, the bone can be partly digested in a dog's stomach. Unlike other food – such as meat or vegetables, which are absorbed as food or pass out as faeces – the bone gets ground up into a sand-like substance. This can then cement into hard lumps within the animal's gut. At best, the animal will be constipated for several days and suffer discomfort on passing a stool and, at worst, the mutton bone will get lodged and the dog will need an operation. In some cases, if the blockage is not caught early, the dog

could die. Even the milder cases are quite distressing. Believe me, there's nothing quite so painful looking as a constipated Labrador!

The results of feeding other sharper bones, such as chicken and turkey bones, can be even more dramatic. When food is being digested, the muscles in the stomach and intestines contract and relax – in this way they help break the food down into smaller pieces which can be easily digested by enzymes. But if that muscle contracts onto something sharp, say a chicken bone, the stomach can actually be punctured. In some instances the bone can pass through the stomach wall and pierce other organs such as the liver or lungs. This, as you can imagine, is an extremely serious situation and can also result in the death of the dog.

Admittedly the BARF diet advocates feeding raw bones rather than cooked bones, but there are other difficulties with these. Uncooked bones are that bit harder and more rigid. Ribs, for example, can get caught in dogs' throats or behind the back teeth or in the roof of the mouth. In addition, crunching on these hard bones can cause damage to dogs' mouths, such as tooth fractures.

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A decorative border made of various colored biscuit bones (brown, green, orange, yellow) surrounds the recipe text. The bones are arranged in a rectangular shape, with some overlapping.

Christmas Crunchy Biscuit Bones

- 2 1/2 cups whole wheat flour
- 1/2 cup powdered milk
- 1/2 tsp. sugar (or less)
- 1/2 tsp. salt (or less)
- 1 egg
- 1/4 of beef or chicken stock cube
- 1/2 cup hot water

Dissolve the stock cube in the 1/2 cup of hot water and allow to cool to room temperature.

Stir in the flour, milk, egg, sugar and salt. Take the mixture and knead it for three to four minutes, or until it forms a ball. Roll the dough out into a half an inch thick and then cut into shapes. Bake on lightly greased cookie sheet for 30 minutes at 350-degree Fahrenheit oven (180 degrees Centigrade and gas mark 4).

A close-up photograph of a small, light-colored dog's head, possibly a pug or French bulldog, looking towards the camera. It is wearing a black bow tie.

Dogs' teeth are covered with the very same enamel as human teeth – can you imagine what chewing on a raw bone would do to your Hollywood smile? Supporters of the BARF diet believe that it actually helps keep canine teeth clean. After all, they say, have you ever seen an African wild dog or Australian dingo with plaque? Admittedly I haven't – but then I've never got that close to a wild dog.

Food poisoning

Aside from the problems associated with feeding bones, there are other dangers with feeding a raw food diet. Although you might not think it, having seen your dog rummage through the kitchen rubbish, pets get food poisoning just like us. Raw meat and eggs can contain a range of nasty bugs such as *Listeria* and *Salmonella*, which cause severe vomiting and diarrhoea in animals as well as humans. The best way of ensuring that these bugs do not make it onto your, and your dog's, plate is to ensure that food is cooked thoroughly.

The bottom line is that, as a pet owner, you have the choice whether or not to feed your dog a bone. And, yes, they may enjoy the treat, but does this benefit outweigh the risks? If you do choose to feed your dog bones there's a few simple rules to adhere to, including staying clear of cooked bones and poultry bones – these cause the main problems.

If you do feed a bone, there are signs to watch for in case one does get lodged. If a bone gets stuck in a dog's mouth or throat you may see him drool and/or gag. He may cough and paw at his face. Be careful if you think there is a bone caught – if you try to put your hand in to help dislodge it, he may bite.

If a bone gets stuck further inside, the signs to watch out for include vomiting, an inability to pass a proper stool and/or watery diarrhoea. Dogs that have a bone stuck inside them are also likely to be depressed, off their food and sore around their tummy. Some dogs will object to getting into and out of the car or snap at you if you try to lift them.

If a bone is caught somewhere in a dog's mouth, a vet may be able to pop it out but often he will need to sedate the dog to get near it. However, if a bone is lodged inside, the vet will usually have to put the dog under an anaesthetic, perform x-rays and then operate to take it out.

But, if you want to be totally safe, don't feed bones at all. There are many other ways to keep your dog happy – they would probably prefer a little company from you or to play a game. Also, chewy toys in which you can store food such as 'Kongs' are a much safer alternative. If you still want to go 'natural', why not get creative and make your own 'bones'? There are lots of recipes for homemade biscuit-bone treats available on the internet or try our Christmas biscuit bones on this page. You could even use up the scraps from the Christmas turkey in doggie treats. Just remember, bin the bones!