

FORWARD:

The officers of Therapy Dogs of Vermont have been working very closely with our veterinary and medical expert, Dr. Will Eward, regarding the risks associated with therapy dogs who are fed a raw food diet.

In short, raw food diets contain pathogens which can be transmitted from the dog (through saliva and contact with the dog's fur) to humans. These pathogens can cause life-threatening illness to both dogs and humans. This has been well documented by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as well as many other authorities. Although the risk is small, just as it is for rabies, the outcome of transmission to a very sick, very old, or very young patient would be just as devastating. One can not assume that even while visiting a "healthy" environment that there will not be people with weakened immune systems.

Thus, TDV will release a policy that no therapy dog may be on a raw food diet. TDV will communicate this officially once that statement has been decided upon.

Please review Will Eward's short research findings and explanation on this issue. Please do not hesitate to send questions to the TDV account (Questions@Therapydogs.org). These questions will forward to Will.

Position Statement on Raw Food Diets in Therapy Dogs

Raw food diets have exploded in popularity among dog owners during the past decade. While this practice was previously unique to select groups of canine athletes (namely racing Greyhounds and distance event sled dogs), it is now an increasingly common practice among dog owners of all varieties.

Consumption of raw food diets has long been known to pose a risk of enteric infection to the dog consuming raw meat (just as we humans are at risk from consuming raw or undercooked meat). A 1993 study found that the raw meat diets being fed to Greyhounds contained Salmonella 44.6% of the time (2). That this exposure translates into illness in even healthy dogs and cats has been well-documented in the literature (3,4) as well as in my personal experience.

Zoonotic diseases are those which can be transmitted between animals and humans (and vice versa). It is well known that the pathogens found in raw food diets - including Salmonella spp., Campylobacter spp., Escherichia coli O157, Yersinia enterocolitica, Listeria monocytogenes, Clostridium perfringens, Clostridium botulinum, Staphylococcus aureus, and Bacillus cereus - are common to both dogs and humans (4). A 2002 study found not only that 80% of raw food diets in their study population contained Salmonella, but that 30% of the dogs in question tested positive for Salmonella in their stool (5). This finding has naturally led to concerns about the public health risks of dogs being fed raw (or undercooked) meat.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that most cases of human Salmonellosis are caused by four serovars: *S. enterica* ser Enteritidis, *S. ser* Typhimurium, *S. ser* Newport, and *S. ser* Heidelberg (6). These are the same serovars encountered in canine Salmonellosis (6).

The FDA cautions that Salmonella infection "can cause flu-like symptoms (e.g. nausea, vomiting,

abdominal pain and diarrhea) in normally healthy people, but may cause far more serious - even life-threatening injury in immune-compromised patients. Elderly people, young children, and people with weakened immune systems are particularly at risk."

The potential for human exposure from dogs fed raw meat diets has been described in the literature (4,6). While a healthy individual may have a low level of concern, the level of concern for the immunocompromised is very high.

I feel strongly that the scientific evidence points to a very real and very devastating risk. Admittedly the risk is small, but 1 in 1000 is not such a small number if you are the parent of an immunocompromised child on Baird 5 who dies or becomes very ill from an exposure which could have been easily prevented.

My recommendation is that we (TDV) not allow dogs being fed raw food diets to become therapy dogs. I am aware that one person has alluded to New York's policy of spraying down therapy dogs with Listerine prior to visits. While this is for the members to decide, I certainly would not want my dog routinely sprayed down with Listerine.

I expect that the current trend will continue: that the risks of raw food diets to both pets and their human contacts will continue to become known. However, in the unlikely event that the safety of therapy dogs eating raw food is scientifically proven, I would be all too happy to modify my position.

It is worth noting that even proponents of raw food diets acknowledge that there is currently no evidence to support that dogs receive a health benefit from eating raw food diets (1). Stogdale and Diehl (who support the responsible use of raw food diets) acknowledge, "To our knowledge, feeding home-prepared cooked or raw diets has not been proven to control medical problems, based upon prospective, double-blind, statistically significant clinical trials." (1). However, many veterinarians (myself included) have observed anecdotally that certain gastrointestinal diseases in the dog appear to respond favorably to raw protein sources. It is unfortunate for these very few dogs that their dietary requirements would preclude them from interacting with the very young, the very old, and the very sick. However, for most owners who simply choose to feed a raw food diet, they will be required to choose between this diet and their dog's volunteer activities.

Summary: I've made a position based on what has been demonstrated in an evidence-based manner. Namely: 1) There are pathogens which cause life-threatening illness to both dogs and humans. 2) These pathogens are found in raw and undercooked meat. 3) These pathogens are transmitted to dogs fed raw and undercooked meat. 4) These dogs shed these pathogens in their feces (which means that their fur is also contaminated, just as you have harmless E. coli from your feces on much of your body.) 5) The CDC is concerned about the risk of these pathogens and that's good enough for me. 6) Although the risk is small, the outcome of transmission to a very sick, very old, or very young patient would be devastating.

Bibliography

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3) Stiver et al. Septicemic Salmonellosis in Two Cats Fed A Raw-Meat Diet. J Am An Hosp Assoc 203;39:538-542.

4) LeJune et al. Public Health Concerns Associated With Feeding Raw Meat Diets to Dogs. J Am Vet Med Assoc 2001;Vol 219, No. 9:1222-1225.

5) Joffe DJ, Schlesinger DP. Preliminary assessment of the risk of Salmonella infection in dogs fed raw chicken diets. Can Vet J. 2002 Jun;43(6):441-2.

6) Sanchez et al. Animal Sources of Salmonellosis in Humans. J Am Vet Med Assoc 2002; Vol 221, No. 4:492-497.

Sincerely,

Will Eward, DVM