

## **Therapy Dogs of Vermont (TDV) Raw Food Diet Policy**

Raw food diets for dogs first became popular among a few groups of canine athletes, including Greyhounds and distance-events sled dogs. Over the past decade, dog owners of all varieties have chosen to adopt raw food diets. Proponents of raw meat diets say it improves dogs' performance, coat, body odor, teeth, and breath.

However, 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. 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." Of course, only a dog's owner can make the decision that a raw food diet is, or is not, in their animal's best interest.

TDV's responsibility, on the other hand, is to provide effective therapeutic visits while protecting the health and safety of the people we visit, who often are dealing with compromised health. The potential for human exposure to infection from dogs fed raw meat diets has been well documented. While a healthy individual may have a low level of concern, the level of concern for the immunocompromised is very high.

TDV has worked very closely with our veterinary and medical expert, Dr. Will Eward, regarding the risks associated with therapy dogs that are fed a raw food diet. 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. That this exposure translates into illness in even healthy dogs and cats has been described in the literature.

"It is really important to note that 99 percent of raw meat samples were contaminated with aerobic bacteria, and 79 percent had gram-negative, probably enterica, contamination," the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Dr. Strohmeyer reported. For example, 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. Bacteria are not the only health concern, there are also parasites and protozoal organisms that can be transmitted in raw meat, even meat labeled fit for human consumption.

The CDC does not recommend feeding raw foods to a pet because of the risk of foodborne infection to the pet and to household members. Sometimes bacteria found on raw meat is can cause very serious and hard to treat illnesses. The most important germs to be concerned about are Salmonella and E. coli. In a typical infection, both people and pets can experience diarrhea, stomach cramps and fever. For young children, the elderly, HIV/AIDS patients, pregnant women or others who have a weakened immune system, infection with these germs can be extremely serious, causing hospitalization or even death.

Based on recommendations by TDV's veterinary and medical expert, the CDC, and multiple other sources, Therapy Dogs of Vermont has established a policy that no TDV therapy dog may be on a raw food diet.