

What the CDC says about Raw Food Diet

Some people believe that raw food or "BARF" diets are better for their pets because they are not processed and are perceived as a dog or cat's evolutionary "natural" diet. Though there may be some nutritional value to feeding raw foods, there are significant health concerns to be aware of before choosing this type of diet. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does NOT recommend feeding raw foods to a pet because of the risk of foodborne infection to the pet and to household members. Raw meat is often contaminated with tiny germs called bacteria. Sometimes bacteria found on raw meat 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.

Bacteria are extremely small and it would be impossible to visually look at a piece of raw meat and determine if it had bacteria on it or not. Because of the potential for raw foods to be contaminated with harmful bacteria it is very important to cook meat thoroughly before eating it or preparing it for pets. It is also very important to handle raw meat carefully. Contamination of the countertops, knives, cutting boards, sink, floor and dog bowls can all occur if raw meat is not handled properly and if it is fed to pets. If a person touches the contaminated surfaces and then eats, drinks or puts their fingers in their mouth, they risk becoming infected with the germs. Pets that ingest harmful bacteria will also pass harmful bacteria through their stool. Therefore, it is very important to clean up after the dog or cat has defecated.

To protect against bacteria:

- * Do not feed raw meat to pets, especially if there are young children, pregnant women, elderly persons or others in the household who have a weakened immune system.
- * Wash hands, knives, cutting boards and countertops well with hot soapy water after handling raw meat.
- * Do not keep raw meat in the refrigerator longer than a couple of days
- * Cook raw meat until it is no longer pink.
- * Do not taste pieces of meat while they are still raw Clean up and properly dispose of all dog and cat stool as soon as possible

Besides bacteria, persons who are considering feeding a raw foods diet should think about the physical safety of their pets. Many bones, especially from chickens, can splinter as the pet chews on them. Pets have gotten bones lodged in their throats or have suffered damage to their esophagus by swallowing broken pieces.

Here is a recent article written about contamination of raw food diets:

Raw meat diets spark concern

In recent years, feeding dogs raw meat has become increasingly popular. The trend, however, has sparked health concerns, because of the risk of foodborne illnesses in pets as well as the public health risks of zoonotic infections. Now, a new study that identifies potentially harmful bacteria in 21 commercial raw meat diets bolsters these concerns.

"This has some potential public health concerns for both the animals being fed these diets and their human owners," said Dr. Rachel Strohmeyer, a researcher at the Animal Population Health Institute, Colorado State University. She presented her findings at the annual meeting of the Conference of Research Workers in Animal Diseases held in Chicago in November.

Proponents of raw meat diets say it improves dogs' performance, coat, body odor, teeth, and breath. While high-performance dogs, such as racing Greyhounds and sled dogs, have been fed raw meat diets for years, the trend to feed raw meat to companion dogs is new.

Because of this trend, and because the safety of these raw diets has received limited attention, Dr. Strohmeyer tested 21 commercially available raw meat diets, two dry dog foods, and two commercial canned dog foods for non-type specific *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella* spp, and *Campylobacter* spp. The researchers purchased diets of beef, lamb, chicken, and turkey in four months, trying to space the purchasing times far enough apart so that they came from different lots. Three samples from each product underwent bacteriologic culturing each time.

The researchers did not find *Campylobacter* spp in any of the foods, but non-type-specific *E coli* was isolated from all raw meat products. Ten of the raw products contained *Salmonella enterica*. "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," Dr. Strohmeyer said.

The scientists also found non-type-specific *E coli* in a few of the samples taken from the dry food, and believe post-processing contamination is to blame for these results.

"There is a greater apparent risk to animals and humans from feeding a raw meat diet," Dr. Strohmeyer commented. "I really do not think that there is any advice we, as veterinarians, can give to improve safety. You can give basic food safety guidelines like hand washing, cleaning surfaces, and bowls, etc., not letting the food sit out for extended periods of time. I just think that it would be a disservice for a veterinarian to give any recommendation for the safety of dogs and their owners (except to not feed raw meat to pets). 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."

Other veterinarians, including Dr. Jeffrey LeJeune, a food safety molecular epidemiologist and microbiologist at The Ohio State University, agree that pets should not be fed raw meat. This may be a hard sell, however, to some clients.

"From my own clinical experience, owners that feed raw (meat) pretty much have their minds set that they are going to feed raw," Dr. Strohmeyer said. She thinks clients who are thinking about feeding raw (meat), however, can be swayed fairly easily, just by basic education.

E coli will not pass from the digestive tract to the outside of the dog through the skin and fur. However, it is possible for the fur and skin, paws, and mouth area to be contaminated with *E. coli* from the anal area if the dog is shedding *E. Coli* in its feces

Thank you for your inquiry.

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