

UNDER THE WEATHER

Thinking of Going Green?

Not for your pet please! I wish people would take my word for it and give their pets a meat based diet. Yet most times I am faced with this issue, the pet parent usually has religious or emotional sentiments attached to it, as well as some amount of misinformation, so let me clear the air about what your pet should eat, and why.

Dogs are facultative carnivores. What this means is that your dog will probably survive on a plant based diet, but will not thrive on it. "But my aunt gave her dog a pure vegetarian diet, and he survived for 12 years...", is a common statement. Okay, but how would you know he wouldn't have survived 13 and a half years on a non vegetarian diet? Has your aunt done a large double blind controlled study on the effects of a vegetarian diet on dogs? Your pet's life span (and yours for that matter), is largely determined by genetics.

However, nutrition and environmental factors have a large role to play in optimising the predetermined genetic lifespan. Dogs and cats get a majority of their nutrients from bone, meat and organs. (Zinc, magnesium, manganese, calcium, phosphorus and protein.) For dogs and cats, meat is much more nutritious than veggies, fruits and grains. They need much more calcium, copper, selenium, vitamin B12 and zinc than we do. They could never get enough from grain, fruits and vegetables. It is readily apparent that their teeth are designed by nature for eating a diet largely comprised of animal tissue. Their short intestinal tracts compared to humans, and especially to animals like sheep or horses, also indicate they are not designed to accommodate diets containing large amounts of plant materials.

A dog can live on a diet containing vegetarian food just fine but for optimal health a well thought-out diet of meat, bone and organ is by far the best thing you can feed your dog. (By bones, I mean pulverised in dog food, or in the form of calcium tablets,



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also need dietary sources of taurine and arachidonic acid (an essential fatty acid), both of which are found in appreciable levels only in animal tissues. I had a client who rescued a kitten and insisted on giving her vegetarian food because his religion would not allow it. I tried to explain that he was trying to change nature's design, that he should not force his ideology on a poor kitten, but he was adamant. A year later, he got the kitten to the clinic saying she was passing bloody urine. An X-ray showed large stones in the urinary bladder, and we had to operate to remove stones that were almost as big as the bladder itself! Why did this happen? A carnivore's urine is supposed to be acidic. Feeding a vegetarian diet makes urine alkaline and predisposes to calculi in the urine.

Similarly, I see a lot of vegetarian dogs suffer from heart disease I suspect could be from taurine and carnitine deficiency. These are amino acids found only in non vegetarian food, and deficiency of these may cause a weakness in the contractility of the heart muscle. The decision to feed a dog/cat a vegetarian diet is not one to be taken lightly. It carries an element of risk to the pet's health, and goes against the laws of nature. So if you have a moral/ethical dilemma about this, think carefully before bringing a pet home.



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