

Alternatives and New Trends in Pet Food

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Introduction

In the last decennium, about 10% of pet owners have abandoned traditional commercial diets with increasing interest for alternative choices (Diez et al., 2015, Vandendriessche et al., 2017). Feeding of home-made diets, vegetarian/vegan diets and raw meat based diets have become an increasingly popular trend (Michel et al., 2006). This change has been partially driven by an increasing pet owner distrust of conventional pet food manufacturers (Schlesinger and Joffe, 2001). Whereas food additives such as antimicrobial preservatives and antioxidants are added to increase shelf life, their addition nowadays provokes anxiety in some pet owners about their impact on long-term pet wellbeing (Laflamme et al., 2014). Furthermore, animal byproducts often incorporated in conventional pet foods, such as liver and meat trimmings, are often wrongly perceived as poor-quality ingredients. For these reasons, natural, organic or human grade foods free of artificial additives and/or animal byproducts are preferred by certain pet owners.

Some Particular Alternatives out there

Some of the most passionate and sometimes almost evangelical arguments surrounding pet nutrition concern the feeding of raw meat-based diets, as these are often considered diets wild ancestors ate during their evolution into pets. Many different forms exist: home-made/commercial fresh, frozen or freeze-dried diets and treats, grain and supplement mixes which can be combined with raw meat, BARF (Bones and Raw Food), the Ultimate and Volhard diet and even whole carcass feeding. Whereas commercial nutritionally complete and balanced diets are intended to provide sole-source nutrition for a pet, homemade raw-meat based diets are often based on rotation of ingredients to expectantly meet essential nutrient requirements (Freeman, 2013).

Apart from its obvious nutritive value, food also has a social aspect. Pet owners are inclined to show affection for their pets through food, and have an increasing desire to cook and therefore invest time in their pets health. Unfortunately, many owners are known to make wrong substitutions and forget essential fatty acid and vitamin and mineral supplementation when preparing homemade diets, thereby unwillingly impairing their pets health. Formulating balanced homemade diets for pets is rather difficult and does require specialized knowledge (Michel, 2006).

Additionally, questions about sustainable agriculture and slaughter of animals in order to feed pets are currently raised. A vegetarian ideology is on the rise, where people do not only question their own dietary habits, but also those of their pets. Owners might prefer fish/egg-based diets for their pets, or choose vegan diets supplemented with synthetic compounds in order to meet dietary requirements.

Discussion-Conclusion

Health care professionals are often bombarded with pet owner opinions regarding unconventional diets, and have a need to stay current with research on popular trends. The pet food market has many opposing viewpoints and may cause confusion in well-intending pet owners. Dialogue must begin with an effort to understand reasoning for choosing an unconventional diet. Many claims of nutritional superiority and health benefits of unconventional diets remain in fact unproven and are based on personal experiences and plausible, but not scientifically proven, hypotheses. Admittedly, recalls of pet foods for bacterial/mycotoxin contamination, thiamine deficiency, etc... indicate that feeding of commercial traditional pet foods is not 100% risk-free either (Steel, 1997; FDA, 2017). Although it is the pet owner that ultimately decides what their pet will eat, efforts must be made to inform owners about potential risks and benefits of both commercial and alternative diets.

Further reading

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