

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

NATURAL FEEDING OF DOGS

There is an increasing trend to avoid feeding commercial pet foods because of concerns about the ingredients used in their manufacture. Ingredients in common use and considered to be unsuitable are by-products, unsuitable grain carbohydrates, dairy products, added sugars and salt, potentially toxic synthetic additives including artificial vitamins. In addition, commercial pet foods are thought to be generally lacking vital elements available only from 'whole' food ingredients. Alternative methods of feeding are popularly known as Natural Feeding.

Natural Feeding is intended to mirror the diet of the un-domesticated dog and is highly recommended by holistic veterinary surgeons. Natural feeding not only maintains robust health but it is used for both the prevention, and as part of the treatment, of many ailments. It can be achieved through the following methods.

1. Use BAHNM certified holistic products
2. Make up food from individual ingredients.
3. Use a mix of the two

There are many health benefits to be had from Natural Feeding, but if diets are being home prepared it is obviously vital to ensure that the correct nutrients are being provided. A guide to this is to provide a variety of ingredients which mirror the natural diet. That is in basic terms, meat, carbohydrate and vegetables. Some owners, following variations of Natural Feeding methods (BARF) do not use grain cereals and give totally raw food. This is an acceptable way to feed but needs careful consideration, is not easy, and is by no means necessary.

The natural diet of the dog

The natural diet of the dog in the wild is animals, usually herbivores, which they have brought down and killed. These would be consumed in their entirety and nothing, except perhaps the teeth of the animal, would remain. Meat, bones, skin, stomach contents, intestines, hooves and all would be devoured. Dogs are omnivorous; they would also take fruit and dig for roots as well as taking rodents and other small animals.

In practice this diet cannot of course be easily or satisfactorily replicated for our dogs. Domestication forces compromises whether we like it or not. Whilst it is not easy to provide the range of nutrients which would be present in a natural diet it is possible to provide a diet which is along similar lines. This can be as certified holistic product or by making up the diet from individual raw materials at home or a mix of the two.

If the diet is being prepared from scratch, knowledge of basic nutrition is required in order to avoid various pitfalls. A happy compromise for the modern busy dog owner is to feed BAHNM certified commercial products during the week and prepare food for their dogs from individual raw materials such as vegetables and other meats at the weekend when they have more time.

1. BAHNM CERTIFIED HOLISTIC PRODUCTS

Some dog foods are approved under the BAHNM certification scheme. The scheme is designed to provide an informed choice for the consumer. Certified holistic foods are manufactured according to the definition of Holistic Feeding Stuffs. They contain no ingredients that are incompatible with the physiology of the dog and provide a nutritional profile that reflects the natural requirements of the animal. The BAHNM operates a free helpline for dog owners who wish to keep and feed their animals using holistic principles including Natural Feeding. It also maintains a list of suitably qualified and experienced holistic veterinary surgeons - www.bahnm.org.uk.

2. MAKING UP FOOD FROM INDIVIDUAL INGREDIENTS

An appropriate natural diet could consist of three main elements. For a healthy dog these could be provided in about even quantities, although the ratios may change according to individual circumstances.

Cereals

Suitable types of commonly available cereals are rice, barley, rye and oats all of which have to be cooked. A mixture of cereals is better than using one type. Wheat and soya may also be used but some dogs have developed, or have inherited, intolerance to them caused by overuse of these substances.

Meat

Lamb, beef, boneless fish, chicken, plus other types of meat except pork, are all suitable. Meat can be given raw, but many owners cook it, which is fine provided it is not overcooked. Again a variety of meats is desirable.

Vegetables

Part of the dog's diet should be from a vegetable source; again these are available to the wild dog through the stomach of its prey. Whilst some certified holistic commercial foods contain suitable vegetable matter, fresh lightly boiled/liquidised green vegetables, such as cabbage and broccoli, are a valuable addition to the diet and most dogs enjoy them. Starchy root vegetables such as potato and parsnip should be kept to a minimum. All vegetables should be lightly cooked or liquidised or the dog cannot digest them properly.

Bones

Some professionals do not recommend the use of bones, because in some circumstances, they can cause problems mainly related to their sharp edges. If the rules are followed the benefits of giving bones far outweigh the risks. All dogs love bones especially large knucklebones, which they will gnaw on for hours.

Bones provide calcium and other nutrients in an ideal form provided they are not cooked, but they should not be overfed as they can cause constipation. They also keep the teeth and gums in top condition. Cooked bones should never be given as they have an increased tendency to splinter and are not digested properly. If you have more than one dog, make sure that they do not fight over bones as this can cause them to be eaten too quickly. Puppies should be introduced to large knuckle bones from an early age. Some dogs may have to learn to chew if they have always been given processed foods and no bones.

Cooking

Whilst raw meat is easily digested by the dog, raw carbohydrates and vegetable matter is not. Normally these ingredients are broken down through pre-digestion in the stomach of the dog's prey so they have to be pre-processed as above, otherwise the dog's digestive system cannot utilise them.

Whilst for the most part cooked meat is perfectly acceptable, some raw meat from a reputable source should also be given as it helps keep the digestive flora healthy.

3. FEEDING A MIX OF COMPLETE DOG FOODS AND HOME PREPARED FOOD – A CONVENIENT ALTERNATIVE

Sourcing and preparing the proper range of individual items for the dog's diet at home can be very time-consuming. A more convenient alternative is to use a good quality complete food as a base diet, say 80%, with the addition of other fresh and raw ingredients.

A happy compromise for the modern busy dog owner is to feed BAHNM certified commercial products during the week and prepare food for their dogs from individual ingredients such as vegetables and other meats at the weekend when they have more time.

NB Many commercial foods use terms such as 'natural' and 'holistic' in a way which is misleading. The ingredients in most are not what the consumer would choose to buy if they were making up food from individual raw materials. BAHNM certified foods are manufactured according to Natural Feeding principles given here and they may be used with full confidence, either as a complete food or mixed with home prepared ingredients as described above.

The BARF diet and Natural Feeding

The BARF diet is an acronym for Biologically Appropriate Raw Food. It was coined by an Australian veterinary surgeon by the name of Ian Billingshurst who suggested that many modern dog foods were causing problems basically because –

1. They contain high levels of unsuitable carbohydrates, depleted by-products and artificial additives.
2. Cooking reduces the nutritional value of the food

Billingshurst therefore proposes a diet of raw meat and vegetables together with raw bones. The basic ideas of the BARF diet appear to be consistent with Natural Feeding in that it follows the evolved requirements of the species; by-products and artificial additives are certainly not consistent, however Billingshurst is against the inclusion of any grain carbohydrate in the diet on the grounds that it is not digestible and the dog has not evolved to cope with it. Grain cereals can certainly cause problems and attention has been drawn to these recently, but it is usually not the presence of carbohydrate in the diet which causes the problem, but the type and the amount. Cooking need not cause problems if it is done properly. See Grains and Cooking above.

MAIN POINTS FOR NATURAL FEEDING

- Carbohydrates from cereals can be a part of the dog's diet. The point is to give a range of different types and not too much.
- For a dog in good digestive order about one third carbohydrate, one third meat, and one third vegetables is about right. This may have to be adjusted according to other factors, such as age, life style, or other factors.

- Feeding dogs is a simple matter provided the food given reflects the dog's natural requirements. If good quality raw materials are used, complicated regimes and specialist commercial diets are not usually necessary.
- If the food is being prepared from scratch it is important to ensure that all nutrients are provided in a proper form. A basic knowledge of canine nutrition is required to provide a balanced diet.
- The BARF diet is not inconsistent with Natural Feeding in that all ingredients are compatible with the evolved physiology of the species. It is possible to combine aspects of both, as a highly preferable alternative to modern commercial dog foods.
- It should be remembered that all dogs are individuals and they like variety. Boredom with the same diet on a daily basis is one reason for 'fussiness'.
- If bones are being fed it is vital that should be given raw.
- If supplements are being given they should either be prepared from scratch or bought from a trusted manufacturer. Many are sold as natural but are not suitable to be used as a part of an holistic diet.
- A more convenient alternative to home preparation of all individual ingredients is to use a certified holistic food as a base diet, say 80%, with the addition of other fresh and raw ingredients.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Dogs should be fed either once or twice a day, and the amount given should vary. The dog should eat every scrap of food put in front of it in one sitting. If it does not the food should be taken away. Dogs should need no encouragement to eat good food. With the exception of elderly dogs and puppies, healthy animals should have food withheld completely for 24 hours every seven days or so. This may seem unkind but it suits the dog's physiology, which has evolved to cope with feast and famine. The dog's wild counterparts will gorge themselves and then go without food for some time. Fresh clean water should always be available (changed daily) and if this is hard or excessively chlorinated it should be boiled first and allowed to reach room temperature before putting it down for the dog. Food and water bowls should be made from glazed earthenware, pottery, china, stainless steel or enamel. They should not be made of plastic or aluminium, as materials from these types of containers may leech into food and water and they have not been proven safe to ingest.

The amount of food a dog needs will vary depending on many factors and it is probably best to feed by 'eye'; if the dog is getting 'ribby' give more, if he is getting fat, give less. Add or subtract one quarter of food volume as

appropriate until the desired effect has been achieved. Changes in weight should not happen quickly, and are best brought about over a period of around two to three months. Many dogs are overweight, either because their owners are unaware of the fact, or because they do nothing about it, which is being unkind to the dog; a dog should have a waist, which should be discernable when looking down on him. The most natural and therefore the healthiest condition for a dog to be in is lean and fit. One of the most common causes of early demise in dogs is overweight.

For free technical information on integrated holistic nutrition and medicine and advice in specific circumstances contact: tech.help@bahnm.org.uk

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