

# Fishy business?

vegan pet food

Veterinarian Andrew Knight on the best diets for our pets

**I**magine drifting along in a turquoise sea, lulled by waves gently lapping at the white sands of the exotic location your boss has finally flown you to, in humble appreciation of your years of skilled and valued service. The sun is warm, the sky blue, and the breeze gently flutters the palm leaves shading the cocktail waiting by your deckchair. All is as it should be.

Suddenly, your peace is shattered by an almighty splash! A furry, ginger blur zooms past you, frothy bubbles rising from its wake. Squinting against the bright light, you're just able to make out a pair of soggy ear tips

**MEAT-BASED DIETS COMBINE ADDITIVES OF QUESTIONABLE SAFETY WITH BODY PARTS FROM ANIMALS CATS AND DOGS NEVER NATURALLY EAT**

and a keenly quivering tail, rapidly receding towards the deeper blue. "Ah-ha," you declare, "it's just a local house-cat, seeking to fulfil the natural feline diet of fish!" Upon settling back to cast your gaze once more into the infinite depths of the azure sky, you reflect that you know a thing or two about cats. The feline predilection for fish, for example, is well established. Particularly tuna. Soon after

rising each day, you know that coastal cats naturally swim 10-20 miles out into the ocean, hunting bluefin tuna weighing up to half a ton, which they engage in underwater battles to the death. You know they garnish their meals with smaller species, such as salmon, prawns and whitebait. Thankfully, attacks on sunburnt floating primates have not yet been recorded. You know that burgeoning colonies of inland feral cats in countries such as Africa have reverted to their traditional ways, stalking and hunting large game, notably cows, sheep and pigs, further endangering threatened buffalo herds. White Rhinoceros numbers have now fallen to critical levels. These fearsome feline predators apparently like to wash down their kills with cows' milk. Kittens acquire the taste naturally because mother cats leave them with certain chosen, lactating cows for safe-keeping, whilst out hunting other game ... 'Ridiculous!' did I hear you scoff? Think again! Millions of cat and dog guardians worldwide consider it entirely natural to feed their feline and canine companions canned fish and prawns, body parts from cows, sheep, pigs, turkeys, ducks, chickens, and milk. Perhaps you might even be one of them. Yet, contrary to sea and sun-induced hallucinations, cats in their natural environments hunt and kill a variety of small mammals, birds, and large insects. They have not yet been recorded pursuing deep sea tuna, nor terrorizing herds of cows, sheep or pigs.

## MEAT-BASED PET FOOD

Despite the biological evidence, millions of people cling to the belief that it is somehow natural to feed their feline or canine companions commercial diets comprised of assorted body parts from a variety of animals they would never naturally eat. To these are added abattoir products condemned as unfit for human consumption, such as '4-D' meat (from animals that are disabled, diseased, dying or dead on arrival at the slaughterhouse), cleverly disguised using names like 'meat derivatives' or 'by-products.' Unfortunately, fish have not evolved mechanisms to excrete modern oceanic pollutants such as mercury and PCBs, which accumulate in their tissues. Once exposed to air, fish are particularly vulnerable to bacterial putrefaction. Damaged or spoiled fish are also added to commercial pet foods.

Brands from countries such as the US also contain rendered dog and cat carcasses sourced from animal shelters. Similarly, toxic flea collars are not always removed. Unsurprisingly a 1998 US Food and Drug Administration study detected the euthanizing solution sodium pentobarbital, which is specifically designed to kill dogs, cats and other animals, in 43 randomly-selected varieties of dry dog food.

To enhance palatability, dry food is sprayed with a combination of refined animal fat, lard, used restaurant grease, and other oils considered too rancid or inedible for human consumption, containing high levels of unhealthy free radicals and *trans* fatty acids. These oils provide the distinctive smell that wafts from a newly-opened packet of kibble.

Additional hazards include bacterial, protozoal, fungal, viral and prion contaminants, along with their assorted endotoxins and mycotoxins; hormone and antibiotic residues, particularly in brands from countries such as the US, where more of these chemicals are administered to livestock; and potentially dangerous preservatives, some of which have been banned in various countries.

## GREED: A POWERFUL FORCE

The desire of food industry executives to squeeze a few pennies more from ingredients



that should rightly be condemned as unfit for consumption have effectively turned meat-based pet food into a vast, industrial dumping ground, filled with products no sane cat or dog would contemplate. Greed, however, is a powerful inspirational force, which led to the invention of 'digest.' According to the text *Small Animal Clinical Nutrition*, "Digest is probably the most important factor discovered in recent years for enhancing the palatability of dry food for cats and, to a lesser degree, dogs." So what, precisely, is this wonder ingredient? Digest is an industry euphemism for a soup of partially dissolved intestines, livers, lungs and miscellaneous viscera of chickens (primarily), and other

animals, produced using various enzymes and acids. The precise ingredients are closely guarded trade secrets, which, in differing combinations, produce varying flavours. Batches considered to taste more like beef can magically transform a can of miscellaneous animal body parts into 'Beef Stew,' while those considered more 'fishy' may create 'Ocean Whitefish.'

### VEGAN DIETS: HEALTHY?

Properly formulated vegan diets can provide a healthy alternative for both cats and dogs, eliminating the numerous hazards inherent within meat-based pet food. Vegan diets supply all required nutrients using

only vegetable, mineral and synthetic sources. Each species requires particular dietary nutrients, after all, rather than specific ingredients. A growing number of manufacturers now supply vegan companion animal diets (see [www.VegePets.info](http://www.VegePets.info), 'Suppliers'). Both complete diets and dietary supplements are available. The former offer convenience, while the latter provide a cheaper alternative for those wishing to add nutritional supplements to home-made diets. Recipes are available in books like *Vegetarian Cats & Dogs* (Peden, 1999) and *Obligate Carnivore* (Gillen, 2003), and from suppliers.

### UNNATURAL BEHAVIOUR?

Well-meaning but mistaken animal guardians often resist vegan diets, believing that commercial meat-based diets allow greater expression of natural feeding behaviour. This claim warrants closer scrutiny.

When wild cats or dogs kill prey, they gorge as much as possible to prevent consumption by competitors. This is followed by uncertain periods of hunger.

Yet, commercial meat-based diets comprise assorted body parts from animals that cats and dogs never naturally eat, heavily laced with unnatural additives of questionable safety. These are dispensed from tins or packets at predictable times daily, with kibble sometimes available around the clock. The result bears very little resemblance to natural feeding behaviour.

Guardians frequently microchip, vaccinate, de-worm, de-flea and de-sex their furry companions, and confine them indoors at night, because they correctly believe such steps are necessary to safeguard health. Why, then, do so many resist feeding healthy vegan diets to cats and dogs on the basis that it is 'unnatural'?

The real reasons for this curious double-standard probably arise from the deep-seated needs of these otherwise caring animal guardians to justify the suffering and death involved in past and present meat-based dietary choices, through maintenance of a belief that meat is natural or necessary. →



**MEAT-BASED BRANDS FROM SOME COUNTRIES INCLUDE RENDERED DOG AND CAT CARCASSES SOURCED FROM ANIMAL SHELTERS CONTAINING EUTHANIZING SOLUTION**

## HEALTH EFFECTS

The belief that cats, and to a lesser degree, dogs, cannot thrive without meat, remains widely held, even by veterinarians. However, a recent search of the bio-medical literature yielded only one study demonstrating an adverse effect in vegetarian cats. This diet was known to be nutritionally deficient.

On the other hand, at least ten scientific studies have demonstrated increased risks of a variety of diseases following long-term maintenance of cats and dogs on meat-based diets, including: kidney, liver, heart, neurologic, visual, neuromuscular and skin diseases, bleeding disorders, birth defects, weakened immune systems and infectious diseases (see [www.VegePets.info](http://www.VegePets.info), 'Meat-Based Diets'). As with humans, rates of so-called 'degenerative' diseases such as obesity, cancer, heart and kidney disease are rising in cats and dogs to unnatural and disturbing levels and long-term exposure to unhealthy diets is the most common preventable cause.

In 2006 the first study of the health of a population of long-term vegetarian cats

(most, in fact, were vegan), was published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* – one of the world's leading veterinary journals. Most were clinically healthy, barring minor blood value changes in three cats, who were fed partly on table scraps.

Similarly, a 1994 study of a population of vegan (65%) and vegetarian (35%) dogs again found the vast majority to be in good to excellent health, particularly in lifetime vegans or vegetarians. Based on these large-scale studies and numerous additional reported cases, nutritionally-sound vegan or vegetarian companion animal diets appear to be associated with the following health benefits: increased overall health and vitality, decreased incidences of cancer, infections, hypothyroidism (an important hormonal disease), ectoparasites (fleas, ticks, lice and mites), improved coat condition, allergy control, weight control, arthritis regression, diabetes regression and cataract resolution.

## SAFEGUARDING HEALTH

Nutritionally-sound vegan diets can meet all of the needs of cats and dogs, while avoiding the hazards inherent to commercial meat-based diets. Correct use of a complete and balanced nutritional supplement or complete diet is essential to prevent the nutritional diseases that will otherwise eventually occur, if certain dietary nutrients are deficient.

Changing to a vegan diet may also result in urinary alkalisation, which increases the risk of urinary stones and blockages, especially in male cats. These can be life-threatening. Hence, regular monitoring of the urine acidity of both sexes of cats and dogs is essential, perhaps fortnightly during any dietary transition, and at least every three months after stabilisation. Urine can be collected from dogs using containers such as foil baking trays, and from cats using non-absorbent plastic cat litter available from veterinarians. pH (acidity) test strips are also available from veterinarians, although pH metres provide the most accurate results. The pH of cat and dog urine is normally 6.0 – 7.5. A variety of dietary additives listed at [www.VegePets.info](http://www.VegePets.info) can correct alkalisation, should it occur.

## VEGAN DIET

Great patience and persistence may be required when altering diets, particularly for animals previously exposed to digest. Changes are best made gradually, e.g., by feeding a 90%/10% old/new dietary mixture for a few days, then 80/20%, and so on. Gradual changes also allow an appropriate transition of digestive enzymes and intestinal micro-organisms, minimising adverse reactions such as diarrhoea. Guardians should demonstrate clearly that they consider the new diet just as edible as the old (without possibly warning or alarming their pet by making a fuss!). They should not be concerned if animals eat around new food at first. Having it in close proximity will help create the necessary mental association, as will mixing the food thoroughly, and the addition of odiferous (the sense of smell is very important) and tasty additives, such as nutritional yeast, vegetable oil, nori flakes and spirulina. Gently warming the food may also help. Fresh food should always be offered. The most important factors for transitioning difficult animals are gradual change and persistence. Using these principles, the most stubborn of cats and dogs have been successfully weaned onto healthy vegan diets. ■

## Conclusions

Perhaps one day you'll be the first to spot a house-cat chasing tuna whilst floating along in that tropical island vacation your boss surely owes you. Perhaps you'll be the first to prove hard that it's natural for cats and dogs to eat the numerous incongruous and potentially hazardous ingredients in commercial meat-based pet foods. Until then, however, you might want to consider a nutritionally-sound vegan alternative. This would maximise the chances of good health and longevity for not only your cat or dog, but also, of course, our frequently mistreated, so-called 'food' animals!

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