

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Everything you need to know about your dog's nutrition

Anyone who's ever owned a dog probably knows something that scientists took a while to figure out: dogs will eat anything. Unlike their ancestor, the wolf, dogs are not true carnivores. Our canine companions can thrive on a diet similar to our own, but that doesn't mean you should be setting a place for Fido at the dinner table.

By Anna Mouton



MARKtoe! has been looking into the surprising reason why dogs have different nutritional requirements to other carnivores. And we explain what should – and should not – be on the menu for your furry friends.

Just between best friends

Go back several millennia when humans were hunter-gatherers and dogs were wolves and no one ate much starch. Then someone invented agriculture and the rest, as they say, is history. The human diet changed forever and so did human digestion. Human populations that ate grains – think bread and rice – became better at digesting starch. We did this by increasing the number of our genes that code for amylase, the enzyme that breaks starch into sugars.



After thousands of years of living together, humans and dogs share more than a taste for carbs. We also have similar bacteria on our skins. Researchers found that couples with a dog have a larger proportion of their skin bacteria in common than couples without a dog. Having a dog seems to help spread microbes and increases the diversity of bacteria on our skin. Before you rush off to take a shower, you might want to consider that exposure to many different microorganisms is thought to reduce the risk of allergies and asthma.



And we're beginning to learn that the human-dog relationship is more than skin-deep. The gut bacteria of dogs are more like those of humans than are the gut bacteria of either pigs or mice. The reason? Comparable diets. In humans, researchers have found a link between the bacteria in our gut and our tendency to gain weight. The same seems to be true of dogs. Some dogs – and some humans – have gut bacteria that don't change much with a change in diet. These lucky individuals are less likely to pack on the pounds than those with gut bacteria that vary according to diet.

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The perfect dog's dinner

Dogs need the same basic nutrients as we do: proteins, fats, carbs, vitamins and minerals. But that doesn't mean you should be serving them the same meals. There are some important differences to keep in mind.



Humans have around twice as many genes for amylase as chimpanzees, our closest relatives. And dogs have at least five times as many genes for amylase as wolves do. Dogs also have other genetic adaptations for utilising starch. Scientists think this is because dogs descend from those wolves who were best able to scrounge food from the refuse heaps of the first farming communities. We as humans have changed our biology to match our new diet and dogs We as humans have changed our biology our example. As did mice, rats and pigs.

Although dogs are not true carnivores, they still require more protein than us. Imagine a dog the same size as a human. He should be consuming about 64 grams of protein daily, compared to our ration of 50 grams. And a true carnivore? A man-sized cat would have to eat 96 grams of protein every day to stay healthy – 50 percent more than a dog. It's possible to feed dogs a vegetarian or even vegan diet, but they will usually need more protein on plant-based than on animal-based foods, because they are less able to utilise plant protein.



How much fat should our human-sized dog be eating? Not less than 32 grams a day. This is similar to the bare minimum for people, but our dietary guidelines tend to focus on reminding us of the maximum – we all know why! Our giant cat would need 53 g of fat per day, again far more than a dog. This comes back to our previous point about dogs adapting to the human diet. Dogs are good at extracting energy from carbs whereas cats get their energy mainly from protein and fat. In fact, strictly speaking, dogs and cats don't need carbohydrates, but they can use them as an energy source. Commercial pet foods take advantage of this by including high levels of cost-effective carbs in their formulations.

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An important advantage of feeding your furry friend a commercial food is knowing that you are supplying the right balance of vitamins and minerals. This really matters because dogs and cats don't have the same needs as we do. For example, humans can make vitamin A – which is necessary for vision – from carotenes present in fruit and veggies. Cats can't make their own and must have a dietary source such as liver, fish or synthetic vitamin A. Deficiencies can lead to blindness.

Troubled waters


Cape Town managed to avoid running out of water last year, however, residents endured many stressful months of uncertainty and deprivation. Even now, water restrictions remain in place and this is likely to be the new normal. When every drop counts, how do you ensure that your pets are getting enough to drink while not wasting any?

When Capetonians had to make do with 50 litres of water per day, municipal guidelines suggested that one litre should be allowed for small to medium-sized pets. But is this enough? It depends!

Most animals, including us humans, need roughly 55 millilitres of water per kilo body mass per day. So the average cat would require less than a cup of water, but a chunky rottie or mastiff will drink two or three litres. Canned pet food contains as much as 90 percent moisture, therefore animals eating wet foods obtain some of their fluids this way. Cats, especially, tend to rely on taking in water from food rather than drinking it.




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In contrast to canned food, dry pellets – there's a clue in the name – will hold less than 10 percent moisture. The result is obvious: if Fluffy eats mostly pellets, she's going to be thirstier. Many people with big dogs turn to pellets because of convenience and economics. If you're one of them, remember not to skimp on water.



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This is more crucial during hot weather. When we're too hot, we sweat to cool down. Dogs can't sweat. They cool themselves by panting. In both cases, it's the evaporation of moisture that provides the cooling effect. Just like you reach for a drink when you've been sweating, your canine companion craves a bowl of water if she's been panting. Dogs can suffer from dehydration as much as we do, resulting in damage to kidneys and other organs.

Next time water restrictions limit you to 50 litres a day, know that one of those litres may not even be enough for a medium-sized dog in hot weather. You may need to make the ultimate sacrifice: drink more beer and let Rover have a bigger share of water.



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We've come a long way since the predecessors of our dogs first scavenged in our forefathers' rubbish heaps. These days we can pick and choose from a huge range of pet diets, including special formulations for different ages, breeds and health conditions. Unfortunately, our dogs continue to mirror human eating habits with canine obesity on the rise.

Your meat, but Fido's poison

Our pets can become such a part of our lives that we forget that they're not people. This is seldom a problem for cats, because cats always know that they're far too superior to be human. But dogs want to be like us and eat like us – which can lead to disaster.

Your dog depends on you for its well-being. Money spent on quality food will be repaid in savings on vet's bills and a long life, so invest in a good diet. Then drag your pet away from the television and take him out for some fresh air and exercise – you'll be guaranteed a happy, healthy hound!



Most people know that chocolate is poisonous to dogs. Chocolate contains theobromine and caffeine, both of which can cause irregular heart contractions and seizures. The good news is that a big lab would need to eat more than a slab of milk chocolate to be at risk. Coffee is far more dangerous. The grounds from a couple of double espressos can be sufficient to kill.

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Other common foods that are dangerous to dogs include avocados, grapes, raisins, uncooked bread dough, nutmeg, macadamia nuts and xylitol. Some dogs are able to eat these with impunity whereas others fall sick or die. Don't find out the hard way in which category your pet falls. Rather stick to safe options when handing out treats.



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