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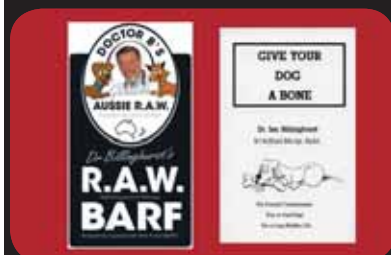
Go to the Internet and check out "Feeding Pets Bones" and you will get a polarised series of articles debating both sides of the question and each adamant about raw meaty bones being crucial or dangerous. It's how the Internet works. You can also see the adversarial arguments in a number of books on the subject as experts on dog and cat nutrition are either total advocates or warn against it. In this article, we'll deal with bones as a dietary supplement for both canine and feline friends, though you'll find that for the sake of brevity, we'll primarily refer to dogs. Cats need bones too and even ferrets benefit from the right type of raw meaty bones.

Certainly there are a number of safety issues involved in feeding bones to pets, from the seemingly innocuous chicken necks, which seem easy to chew and digest, to the massive cow or even buffalo femurs which can barely be carried, much less consumed. Most of us know never to feed cooked bones due to the potential for splintering in the digestive system leading to intestinal perforation and possibly breaking teeth. But few of us realise that bones can also become impacted in the digestive system and can also carry infectious disease, especially if left to 'ripen' in the fridge or go rotten in the garden.

Bones have been a part of canine diets since they were wild and killed their own prey. Though today's domestic dogs share the same digestive system and need for raw food, they have evolved over centuries as pets to not require nor be able to handle things their predator counterparts did in the wild. But there is a definite place for bones, and dogs and cats from a dental front, to nutritional angles in digestion to the faecal matter at the rear. And there are a variety of healthy bones that can be fed at the same time being aware of potential bone-induced problems.

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Starting at the front end, raw meaty bones are great exercise for teeth and jaws as dogs tear at the flesh, which also harkens back to the theory of satisfying the predator instinct as well as being a good source of fresh, uncooked protein. To chew and shred the connective tissue (a doggy version of dental floss, some say) such as tendons and ligaments keeps a dog engaged at the same time it helps to clean the teeth and gums. And finally, getting down to chewing on the actual bone structure provides calcium and phosphorus in its raw form, which is vital for skeletal strength as well as nutrition, especially for growing puppies. And, let's face it, chewing on bones keeps them busy rather than bored.

You can start feeding puppies soft bones such as raw chicken wing tips and raw chicken necks, though this needs to be done under supervision and not just tossed whole but preferably held to be chewed on and nipped at—certainly with a rubber glove to keep the hands clean. If your dog is a snatcher and swallower rather than a chomper and chewer, you need to encourage it to take time to chew rather than to just wolf it down. This is part of the fun factor in feeding and gives a bonding between pet and partner as well as reinforcing the discipline of accepting food.

Being soft and easy to chew and given in limited quantities means that the neck and wing bones should slide through the digestive system and not impact. Never give cooked chicken bones, not even cooked necks, because they can splinter and cause digestive perforation at any point. Besides, cooked bones have had their calcium rendered almost unavailable for absorption as well as hardening to the point of blunting teeth.

Here's where the first argument against chicken bones and other bones comes in from the opposing side. The first two in the case of poultry is that they are fed antibiotics, growth hormones and other substances which would be harmful if passed on to pets. This is a specious argument as poultry growers claim not to use these and many, such as growth hormones, are strictly prohibited at certain times in the growth or harvesting of stock. The other argument is that poultry carries salmonella and e.coli bacteria in great amounts, which can increase rapidly with improper storage. All meats have bacteria and chicken more so, but infection is preventable with only getting fresh meat, strict refrigeration under 5 degrees, with proper handling and serving.

With raw meaty bones, you are not only exercising the jaws and teeth as your dog shreds, chews and pushes the bone around, you also see it doing 'dog bone yoga' as it bends and positions itself to hold and extract every morsel. Pawing down the bone with the front feet and positioning the rear legs as its moves and feeds is a form of whole body exercise. It's light calisthenics and mentally stimulating too. But best of all, it removes tartar from teeth, stimulates gum health and blood flow in the mouth as well as preventing mouth odor from undigested food lodged in the teeth.

Bones are great for the dog's digestion too, far more than the soppy, soft, cooked sludge of canned pet food or the grain-based dry kibbles. Though dry kibbles can help clean teeth and stimulate gums to a degree, they should be supplemented with bones and not be the only dietary input, the same as you would not just feed raw meat or ground meat and bones as a sole diet. As chewed bone fragments course their way through the digestive system, they help to clean the tract and also make for more complete digestion with other foods.

And finally, when it comes to what comes out the other end, feeding raw meaty bones creates more compact, whitish somewhat powdery poo and dogs that are fed bones as part of their diet have less of a problem with diarrhoea. Having had a complex mass of food that takes time to digest rather than grain-based glop means the poo is not a sloppy mess as a result.



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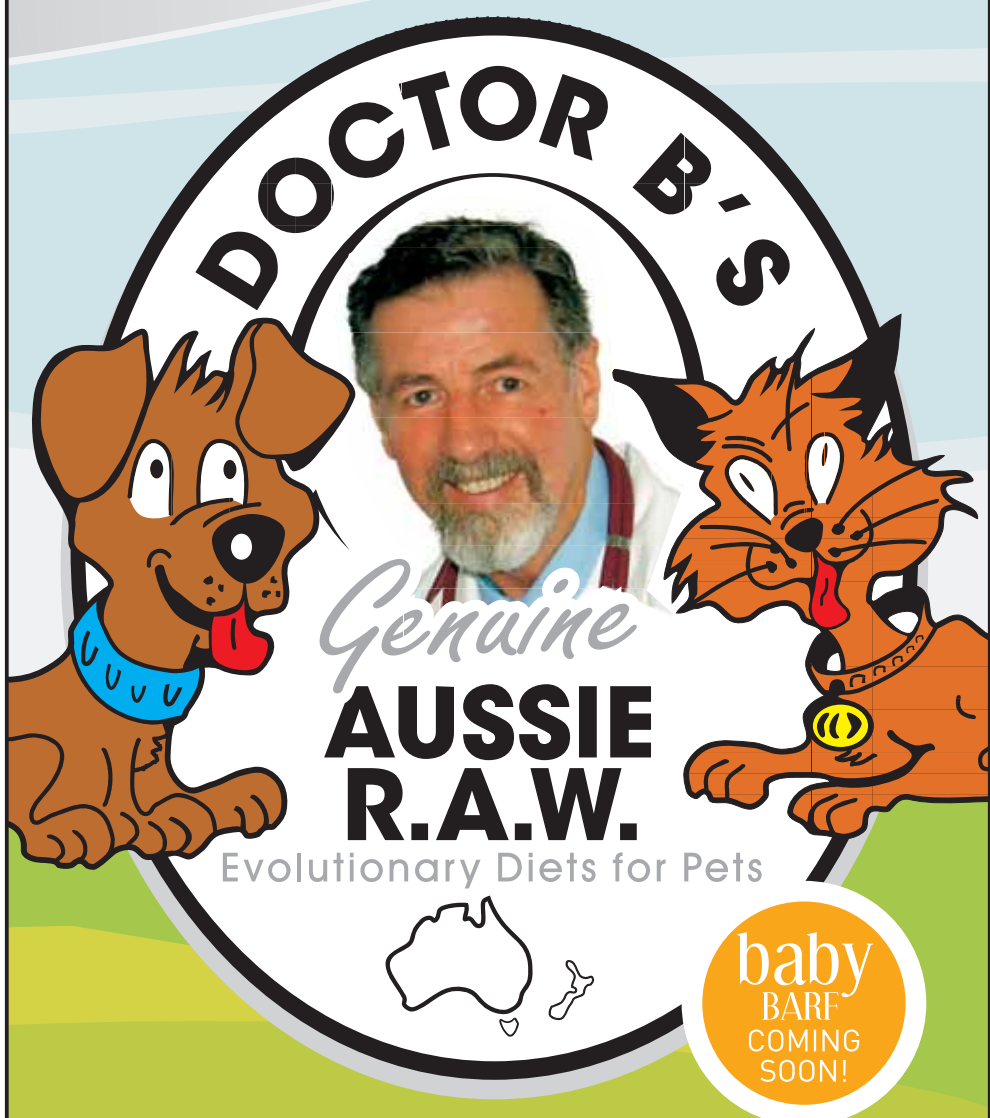
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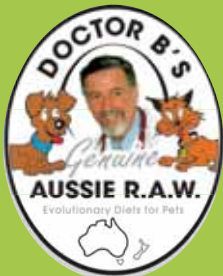


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One of the best options are chicken carcasses or frames, which have had most of the meat stripped from the bones. They are soft, easy to work on for the dog and the ribs and smaller bones get in between teeth better than larger beef bones.

Another benefit of this slow digestion of bone matter is that dogs feel fuller longer and are less prone to overeating and obesity. Where canned food for example requires minimal chewing and can be wolfed down quickly, it passes through fast and can lead to a dog being hungry more quickly than normal. Bones also act like fibre in scouring the tract, providing roughage and their being expelled results in an often not-talked-about emptying of the anal glands.

A foul subject in themselves, the anal glands are right at the sphincter of the dog's bum and harbour a disgusting-smelling substance that not only marks at dog's area as a scent, the anal gland also has other aspects of emitting toxins and warning scents. It's also why dogs sniff each other's rear ends as a communication tool. And you thought it was to see if they were on heat or their poo stank!

Having full, firm stools helps to naturally expel these compounds at the point of forceful ejection, which sloppy poo doesn't do. If anal glands impact or are irritated, it's one explanation why your dog may scoot his backside across the carpet or grass making you think it has worms. It often results in the the anal glands needing to be 'expressed' by squeezing, which is the bane of vet jobs and not one most pet owners would know how to do or relish. Anal glands that impact often or infect frequently have to be removed, which is a painful and potentially dangerous condition for a dog.

So what bones are the right ones and which are bad to feed?

The first thing to consider is freshness followed by fattiness. We recommend procuring your bones from a butcher rather than the bagged product in the pet aisle of a supermarket. Our relationships with about four different butchers mean they know our dogs, know the preference of bone types and they make sure we have the freshest bones and lean, meatier cuts. In supermarkets, you don't know how long the bones have been there, whether they were properly stored prior to being cut up, whether they came from older beasts or what kind of animal and I find they are often very fatty in weight which is not good for dogs from two standpoints—obesity and the potential for pancreatitis.

Too much fat is bad for dogs and cats because it can overload the pancreas and liver. It's the reason that fatty table scraps, chicken or turkey skin, pork fat or cracklings and other high fat foods should not be fed to pets. Some dogs also turn their nose up at certain types of bones whether it's lamb or roo tails. You only know which bones to feed based on giving them high-quality, fresh, lean bones with meat attached.

If you look at bones, whether the 'dinosaur'-sized bones of the hip and femur of large animals, through to brisket, chest and rib bones to the necks and joints of backbones, there are four primary components. First there's the hard bone itself, second is the connective tissue such as tendons, ligaments and soft bone end components, third is meat attached to it and finally the soft marrow that is inside the hollow bones.

The big bones are not advised as a steady diet. They are weight-bearing, hard, thick and can break teeth of some dogs or dislodge them, especially if the dog has not had bones often or has tooth and gum problems. They can also contribute to wearing down of teeth. They are best if fed as a treat instead of regularly and are cut in half both across the middle of the bone as well as lengthwise to expose the marrow running along the inside.

Bones that are too large or tough get scattered or buried so it's important to feed the right size and type depending on the size and type of dog. Lamb necks and shanks are suitable for larger dogs while lamb flaps and brisket bones are ideal for large and medium-sized dogs. Tails are also a great option depending on size. We once had a whole deer butchered and had the hoofs left attached to the leg bone for an all-day sucker. Smaller-size dogs can work on small ribs or cracked pieces of brisket as well as rabbit, chicken and duck bones, even turkey or goose necks!

One of the best options, however, are chicken carcasses or frames, which have had most of the meat stripped from the bones. They are soft, easy to work on for the dog and the ribs and smaller bones get in between teeth better than larger beef bones. There is nothing wrong with feeding a dog an entire chicken carcass with bones intact or cutting portions of them, as long as they remain uncooked. Cats can devour chicken bones as well but not likely an entire carcass. Cats like smaller, softer bones, so necks and wings are the most popular.

DR MICHAEL ARCHINAL
BVSc IVAS (Cert) PTC (Hons)

Dog Expert and ADVANCE Veterinary Technical Advisor.

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References: 1. Smith GK *et al*, JAVMA 2001;219(12):1719-1724.
 2. Runge JJ *et al*, Veterinary Surgery 2008;37:102-103. 3. Smith GK *et al*, JAVMA 2006;229(5):690-693.

Bones with some meat on them encourage the dog to use the front incisor teeth to tear the flesh while softer brisket bones are used by the rear teeth to chomp away. But remember to ask the butcher to use cuts that are as lean as possible and not overly fatty. If you get these sorts of bones, you should cut away the fat or discard the ones that are impossible to trim well enough.

Avoid bones that are too small to swallow without chewing and be wary if your dog or cat tends to be a gutser and will try to consume the bone too quickly. One danger of this is bones lodging in the throat or digestive tract and not breaking down quickly enough. Another thing to avoid is sharply angled sawed bones which may cut gums or cause other punctures in digesting.

The next question is how often to feed them. With puppies, small amounts of chicken necks and tips can be started when they begin with solid foods once they've developed their milk teeth at about six weeks. It's believed that puppies and kittens can have a soft bone daily while growing and this phase ends at about about 6-12 months for cats and small-breed dogs, a year to 18 months for medium-size dogs and up to two years for large breeds.

Ideally, bone breaks should be supervised, especially in the beginning, to observe feeding habits and to be on hand for any problems like choking or getting bones caught between teeth. As your pet is more experienced and adept at handling bones—especially if they have not had them previously—you can be more confident in letting them chomp away without direct supervision, though it's better to be safe.

Adult dogs and cats are able to handle bones two or three times a week while older dogs can have more due to their need for greater calcium in advancing years. An excellent type of bone and cartilage we haven't discussed much at this point is from fish sources. Fish heads are especially good because they take some work to consume while most fish have soft bones, which are not sharp edged. Certain fish have very sharp bones which should be avoided. Some fish, like shark, don't have bones but instead a form of cartilage which is excellent as a natural source of chondroitin and glucosamine as well as calcium.

When is it best to feed them bones? Certainly don't feed just after a meal since they would not be hungry for them and would be most likely to bury them, and not necessarily in the garden. There is nothing quite as vile as discovering the source of that putrid smell is a bone rotting behind the couch or between the cushions. And a bed will never seem the same if you slip between the sheets and discover a half-chewed femur under the pillow.

This brings us to the where to feed part of the article. It's great if you have a yard and can confine them to eating there. But if you have to feed them indoors, it's wise to have a towel or newspapers spread out and encourage or train them to eat there. It's unlikely that they will eat large bones from a bowl but more likely to happen with chicken necks and wing tips or small bones. You can certainly limit feeding bones in an easy to clean laundry area or even a shower cubicle!

One problem to be aware of is 'resource guarding' where the animal may be quick to protect their bone from other pets or children. Be sure to keep children away from feeding animals and if you have more than one pet, feed them their bones in separate areas.

Want to know more on the subject? There are a few excellent books covering the topic and two of them are by Australian vets and quite thorough.

Dr Ian Billinghurst first published "Give Your Dog A Bone" in 1993 and it's gone through 23 printings since. Bathurst-based Billinghurst is best known as the creator of the BARF (Bones And Raw Food) diet and is the manufacturer of frozen patties called BARF that combine ground bone, vegetables, fruit and many other nutrients in easy to defrost and serve portions. The 320-page book goes beyond just bones and is passionately and scientifically written about all aspects of pet nutrition without being boring and preachy.

His second book, first printed in 1998, is titled "Grow Your Pups With Bones" and is aimed more at starting out young for new pet owners and breeders to understand the life cycle in feeding as well as incorporating appropriate nutrition through the life of the the pet. It covers the BARF diet and how to fix it yourself, feeding for breeding and growing pups into adults without diseases. His 2001 book "The BARF Diet" is aimed at 'beginning barfers' and is smaller and easier to digest, covering both cats and dogs.

His books can often be found at pet stores and vets but can be ordered directly through his website www.barfaustralia.com where excerpts can be viewed. Orders can also be made over the phone (02) 6334 2009.

The second prominent Aussie bone advocate is Dr Tom Lonsdale whose 389-page book "Raw Meaty Bones: Promote Health" shares many similarities with Billinghurst's philosophies. The site www.rawmeatybones.com has samples from each chapter and other articles as well as an option to order directly. Phone is (02) 4578 0537.

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