



veg pets?

A meatless diet is better for some species than others. Here's what you need to know

BY HANNAH WALLACE

If you're an ethical vegetarian, chances are you're also an animal lover—and count at least one four-legged friend as a family member. So how do you reconcile your vegetarian sensibilities with feeding chicken, fish, or beef to your beloved pet? “Ethical vegetarians don’t want meat in their homes,” says James Peden, author of *Vegetarian Cats & Dogs* and owner of vegan pet food company Harbingers of a New Age. “They’d prefer not having to deal with a slaughterhouse.”

Yet there are reasons people feed their dogs—and especially their cats—a meat-based diet. “Cats are obligate carnivores,” says Bob Ulbrich, a veterinarian at the Holistic Pet Vet Clinic in Tigard, Ore. In other words, cats require meat for optimal health. “Dogs can survive on a vegetarian diet—but that doesn’t mean they thrive on it. You can survive on Twinkies, but do you want to just survive?”

NUTRITION ESSENTIALS

Cats require high levels of taurine, an amino acid naturally found only in meat. Without it, a cat’s liver won’t function properly, and the cat can go blind, develop cardiomyopathy, and die. Cats also need arginine, vitamin A (which they can’t biosynthesize from vegetables), vitamin D, and the essential fatty acid arachidonate, which plays an important role in inflammation and immune regulation. Though dogs can synthesize taurine and other amino acids on their own, it takes a lot of energy for them to do so, says Ulbrich, who has noticed in his practice that vegetarian dogs don’t seem to have as much energy as dogs fed an omnivorous diet. “It’s because they’re using their resources to generate what they’re not getting from their diet,” he explains. Though domestic dogs are omnivores, having evolved to eat vegetables and grains as well as meat, they are still genetically classified as carnivores.

Ulbrich, a vegetarian for 14 years, says he would never impose his beliefs on another person—let alone another species. “I think it’s great if you’re a primate who eats nothing but vegetables. Our teeth are not designed for tearing into flesh,” says Ulbrich. “However, we’re not dogs or cats.”

VEGGIE DOGS?

That said, if you're a dog owner determined to keep meat out of your home, or if your dog has a hypersensitivity to meat (a rare condition), it is possible to feed a dog a complete vegetarian diet. "You do have to be more careful using a vegetarian diet," says animal behavior consultant James O'Heare, director of the Ottawa, Ont.-based Vegan Dog Nutrition Association. "But every nutrient a dog requires can be met without animal products." O'Heare, who moderates Yahoo.com's Vegan Dog Nutrition discussion board (pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/vegandognutrition), recommends consulting a veterinary nutritionist (find one at acvn.org) to create a diet for your pet's needs. A handful of vegan dog food companies sell nutritionally complete kibble and wet food. Most of these formulations contain synthetic taurine, synthesized vitamin A (known as vitamin A acetate), and arachidonic acid. Some companies also make powdered supplements that can be mixed with homemade kibble.

If you're feeding a large-breed dog, such as a golden retriever or boxer, also look for L-carnitine, an amino acid that may help prevent heart disease. According to Andrew Knight, a London-based vet who advocates vegetarian diets for cats and dogs on vegepets.info, some large-breed dogs are susceptible to cardiomyopathy, and L-carnitine helps transport fatty acids to heart muscle cells. (L-carnitine is found in animal products, but even dogs who eat meat may need therapeutic dosages.)

KITTIES ARE CARNIVORES

Though there are commercial vegetarian cat foods—and a study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* found that cats on meatless diets can have normal taurine levels—most vets are firmly opposed to feeding cats a veg diet. Rebecca Remillard, DVM, a nutritionist at Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston who plans pet diets at the Veterinarian Nutritional Consultation (petdiets.com), says feeding cats a vegan

diet comes with inherent problems that are not easily overcome. "Most of the vegetarian feline patients I have are on the scrawny side," says Remillard. "They eat just enough to live."

Not only are cats true carnivores unable to metabolize large amounts of carbohydrates, they have specific taste buds for the amino acids in meat. Male cats, already at risk for bladder inflammation and urinary blockages because of a narrow urethra, are more prone to crystal formation when their diets lack meat. Even Knight cautions that male cats on a vegetarian diet require very special attention. Their owners must seriously commit to monitoring the acidity of the cat's urine—before going on a veg diet, every two weeks as he adjusts, and then every three months for the rest of his life.

SPLIT VERDICT

Proponents of vegetarian diets for pets blame meat for a host of maladies including allergies, hyperthyroidism, and kidney, heart, and liver diseases. But most vets assert that it's *processed* meat-based food—not meat itself—that leads to these problems. In the end, it's more important that you choose high-quality, wholesome food for your pet—be it vegetarian or meat-based, store-bought or homemade. Shawn Messonnier, DVM, author of *Natural Health Bible for Dogs & Cats*, recommends a prepared food without chemical preservatives (avoid ethoxyquin, butylated hydroxyanisole, and butylated hydroxytoluene) that contains no "meat meal" or "meat by-products" (often indigestible "protein" that can include feathers, hair, hooves, etc.) and that's free of preservative sweeteners such as sugar, sorbitol, ethylene glycol, or propylene glycol—all of which have been linked to diabetes and obesity.

The bottom line? Cats should not be subjected to a veg diet, but dogs can do well without meat—as long as you are committed to giving them nutritionally complete commercial food or a supplement added to homemade food. If you want a pet that's naturally an herbivore, consider adopting a rabbit, guinea pig, chinchilla, hamster, iguana, or tortoise from a local shelter or rescue group. ■

Good Dog (Food)

LOOKING FOR HIGH-QUALITY VEGETARIAN DOG FOOD OR SUPPLEMENTS? CHECK OUT THESE OPTIONS:

- **Dick Van Patten's Natural Balance** formula for dogs (800-829-4493; naturalbalanceinc.com) is made of oatmeal, brown rice, and green peas. It's also free of wheat, soy, corn, and dairy, so it's suitable for dogs with food allergies.
- **Evanger's** (800-288-6796; evangersdogfood.com) makes a canned All Fresh Vegetarian Dinner for canines. Made of fresh veggies, fruit, and brown rice, it also contains brewer's yeast, synthetic taurine, vitamin A acetate, and arachidonate.
- **Evolution Diet** (800-659-0104; petfoodshop.com) has dry and canned food for dogs. Both the Vegetarian Dinner and the Gourmet Pasta Kibble contain synthetic taurine, vitamin A acetate, and other vitamins and nutrients.
- **Harbingers of a New Age** makes Vegedog supplements (406-295-4944; vegepet.com) that can be added to homemade VegeKibble. Though it's labor intensive (you make new batches of kibble every 3–15 days), the supplements provide synthetic taurine, vitamin A, vitamin B₁₂, and other vitamins and minerals.
- **V-dog's** (888-280-8364; v-dogfood.com) Crunchy Nuggets kibble is made with pasta, rice, quinoa, oats, and vegetables, mixed with organic rosemary and parsley (for digestion), yucca extract, and omega fatty acids.