

# Understanding the Risks of Raw Meat Based Diets

A NOTICE TO PET OWNERS



**RBVH**  
RED BANK VETERINARY HOSPITAL  
Veterinary Healthcare Network

## WHAT IS A RAW MEAT BASED DIET?

A raw meat based diet (RMBD) will include uncooked animal-based ingredients such as muscle, organs (i.e. liver, heart, etc.) or bones. Pet owners can purchase these diets from a retailer or make them at home using fresh or frozen ingredients. Commercial RMBDs come in many forms such as fresh, frozen, or freeze-dried. These commercial products can be nutritionally complete and balanced, provide only supplemental nutrition (not intended to be the sole source of food), or come as a carbohydrate premix where raw meat is added. Home-prepared RMBD recipes come from a variety of sources including the internet or books. There are also a wide variety of raw pet treats that are dried or freeze dried including rawhide chews, pig ears, cow hooves, and “bully” sticks.

## HEALTH RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH RAW MEAT BASED DIETS

### Infectious Disease Risk

RMBDs may be contaminated with potentially harmful bacteria or organisms such as Salmonella, E. coli, or Listeria monocytogenes. People in contact with your pet may be exposed to these potentially harmful bacteria through contact with the actual food product, through surfaces or utensils in contact with the food product, or directly from interaction with your pet (e.g., mouth, hair coat, feces). A recent study<sup>1</sup> by the Food and Drug Administration showed 16% of commercial RMBD were contaminated with Listeria monocytogenes and 8% with Salmonella. Other bacteria, such as E. coli O157:H7 and Clostridia, have been cultured from RMBDs as well. Pets consuming these types of diets can shed these bacteria in their feces. Nearly half of dogs fed a single meal of Salmonella-contaminated raw food shed the bacteria in their feces for up to 7 days after the meal.<sup>2</sup> Due to these health risks, these types of diets are particularly inappropriate in households with pets or people who are immunocompromised, young, elderly, pregnant or nursing.

### Unbalanced Nutrition

Home prepared RMBDs typically provide unbalanced nutrition. This can be particularly detrimental in animals that are still growing (puppies and kittens). There are numerous case reports in the scientific literature of animals with nutritional deficiencies as a result of eating an unbalanced home-prepared raw diet. Skeletal problems such as fractures or limb deformities are the most commonly reported sequela. Unfortunately, many published home prepared diet recipes (whether cooked or raw) provide unbalanced nutrition as shown by a recent study.<sup>3</sup> Two hundred home prepared diets written by both veterinarians (65%) and non-veterinarians (36%) were gathered from books and websites. Ninety-five percent of all recipes were unbalanced in at least one nutrient, and 84% of recipes had multiple nutrient deficiencies.

### Additional Risks

Bones (cooked or raw) included in RMBDs can also be a health hazard. The bones may cause fractured teeth or injury to the gastrointestinal tract. Bones can cause obstruction or perforation of the esophagus, stomach, small intestine, or colon.

## ARE THERE ANY REPORTED BENEFITS OF RAW MEAT BASED DIETS?

Unfortunately, many of the health benefits thought to be gained by a RMBD have not been scientifically proven. When compared to dry, extruded pet foods (kibble), RMBDs typically have a higher digestibility, resulting in a decreased fecal volume.<sup>4</sup> This particular benefit has been reported several times in the scientific literature. However, there is insufficient evidence at this time to support additional health benefits of RMBDs in cats and dogs.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE FEEDING A RAW MEAT BASED DIET?

The Clinical Nutrition Department at Red Bank Veterinary Hospital advises against feeding a RMBD due to the public health risk and the risk to your pet. However, we understand that some pet owners will choose to continue to feed these diets knowing these risks. If you choose to feed a RMBD, please be aware of these safety precautions:

1. Assure the diet you are feeding is complete and balanced for the life stage of your pet (growth, pregnancy, lactation, adult maintenance). If you need help determining whether the diet you are feeding is complete and balanced for your animal, check with your veterinarian. If you are home preparing your pet's food without consultation from a board-certified veterinary nutritionist, your primary care veterinarian may recommend a consultation.
2. Follow the Food and Drug Administration's recommendations<sup>5</sup> on handling RMBDs, including:
  - Freeze raw meat and poultry until ready to use.
  - Thaw frozen meats in the refrigerator or microwave.
  - Keep raw food diets separate from other foods.
  - Wash surfaces (counter tops, cutting boards, utensils, food bowls), hands, and any other items that come in contact with a RMBD in hot soapy water.
    - Mix 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach with 1 quart of water to sanitize surfaces (not hands) for 5 minutes.
    - Discard this bleach mixture after 24 hours to maintain effectiveness.
  - Cover any leftovers and refrigerate immediately, or discard safely.
  - Use a stainless steel or single use (paper) food bowl. If plastic or other non-porous food bowl or cutting board is used, sanitize in the dishwasher after each use.
3. Wash your hands after touching your pet, and make sure others do the same. Do not let your pet lick your face. Prevent your pet from being in contact with children, the elderly, pregnant or nursing women, or those who are immunocompromised without informing them, or their legal guardian, of the potential risk.
4. Dispose of your pet's waste appropriately to reduce contamination of the environment.

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Footnotes: As an additional resource for you, we have compiled a comprehensive list of references cited in this handout. Please visit our website at [www.rbvh.net](http://www.rbvh.net) and click on the **Clinical Nutrition** tab found under **Medical Services** on our home page.



If you have any questions regarding this handout, please speak with your veterinarian. The Clinical Nutrition Department at Red Bank Veterinary Hospital sees appointments 7 days a week in Tinton Falls, with availability at Hillsborough, and Mount Laurel. They can be reached at (732) 747-3636 or via email at [nutrition@rbvh.net](mailto:nutrition@rbvh.net).



Veterinary Healthcare Network

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