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# How to Safely Veganise Your Cat or Dog

by Andrew Knight

Cats and dogs are carnivores, right? Not quite. Dogs may be biologically classified as *omnivores*, due to their ability to subsist on a mixed diet of animal and plant-based material in their natural environments. In contrast, cats are classified as *obligate carnivores*, because their evolutionary anatomical, physiological and biochemical adaptations to a carnivorous lifestyle prevent them from deriving substantial benefit from the plant-based material available in their natural environments. Both wild cats and dogs do consume plant material, primarily sourced from the gastrointestinal tracts of their consumed prey.

But doesn't meat allow greater fulfilment of natural feeding behaviour? Once again, 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 such as cows, pigs, sheep, ducks, chickens and fish, animals that cats and dogs never naturally eat, heavily laced with unnatural additives of questionable safety (Knight & Leitsberger 2016). 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.

Animal 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'?

After all, cats, dogs and indeed all species, have requirements for specific dietary *nutrients*, not *ingredients*. There is no scientific reason why a diet comprised only of plant, mineral and synthetically-based ingredients cannot be formulated to meet all of the palatability, nutritional and bioavailability needs of the species for which they are intended. In fact, a growing number of commercially-available vegan companion animal diets aim to do exactly this and studies demonstrate that animals maintained on nutritionally sound vegetarian and vegan diets can be perfectly healthy (Knight & Leitsberger 2016).

If a diet is nutritionally inadequate – whether vegetarian or meat-based – disease is likely to result eventually. Hence use of a nutritionally complete and reasonably balanced commercial diet or of a nutritional supplement added to a home-made diet, is essential, to prevent disease and safeguard health. Both are available from suppliers listed at www.vegepets.info and elsewhere.

Regular urine acidity monitoring is also important to detect urinary alkalinisation, with its consequent potential for urinary stones, blockages and infections, that may result from a vegan diet, in a small minority of cases. Urinary alkalinisation may be corrected via a range of dietary additives. Further information can be found at www.vegepets.info.

Additionally, some studies have indicated that neither meat-based nor vegan diets are always formulated consistently. Accordingly, guardians may wish to consider gradually transitioning their pets onto different brands or diets, every few months, in the hope that any deficiencies will at least differ between different diets.

As with all companion animals, guardians should also monitor the health of their animals on a regular basis, including through regular checks of bodyweight, activity level and demeanour. Although checks should normally occur at least weekly, this should be an iterative process, with assessments as often as required. Any problems, such as progressive weight loss or more obvious signs of illness such as adverse coat changes, vomiting or diarrhoea, should trigger a veterinary examination; which should, in any event, occur at least annually. Owners should consider routine blood screenings and urine tests during such wellness checks and in the case of illness (Knight & Leitsberger 2016).

Great patience and persistence may be required when transitioning animals onto new diets. 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. This allows an appropriate transition of digestive enzymes and intestinal micro-organisms, minimizing adverse reactions such as abdominal discomfort, flatulence and diarrhoea (Knight & Leitsberger 2016).

Guardians should clearly demonstrate 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. Simply having it in close proximity will help create the necessary mental association, as will mixing the food thoroughly. The addition of odiferous (the sense of smell is very important) and tasty additives, such as nutritional yeast, vegetable oil, nori flakes and spirulina, can all help, as well as gently warming the food. Offered food should always be fresh. Gradual change and persistence are the most important factors for transitioning resistant animals and using tactics such as these, the most stubborn of animals have been successfully transitioned onto vegan diets (Knight & Leitsberger 2016).

Such diets have reportedly been associated with a range of benefits, such as improved coat condition, allergy control, weight control, increased overall health and vitality, arthritis regression, diabetes regression, cataract resolution, and decreased incidences of cancer, infections, hypothyroidism and ectoparasites (fleas, ticks, lice and mites). Few controlled population studies exist, although those published to date confirm the potential for cats and dogs to be healthy and active on nutritionally sound vegetarian and vegan diets (Knight & Leitsberger 2016).

Reference

Knight, A., & Leitsberger, M. (2016). Vegetarian versus meat-based diets for companion animals. Animals, 6(9), 57. www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/6/9/57.