

# SHOULD DOGS AND CATS *go vegan?*



## THE EXPERT

Andrew Knight is a veterinary Professor of Animal Welfare. He received a PhD in vegan and sustainable pet food in 2024 and his studies have attracted global coverage.

## It's a topic that seems to get people fired up, but could meat-free pet food be healthier *and* better for the planet? Veterinary Professor Andrew Knight fills us in

**T**he meaty smell that wafts from a can of dog or cat food, or the distinctive tinkle of kibble falling into a food bowl, are often the only signs of animal exploitation remaining within otherwise vegan households. We love our dogs and cats, and we want the best for them. Until recently, that usually meant feeding them assorted body parts from other animals, who were raised on farms, often in crowded, squalid conditions.

Fortunately, in recent years vegan pet diets have become relatively widely available from online shops and some pet stores. These typically use plant-based ingredients, supplemented with all the essential nutrients dogs and cats need. In 2025, the world's first cultivated meat-based pet foods also became available, along with products based on microbial protein. However, plant-based pet foods currently remain the most widely available alternative.



### A healthier option?

In the last five years, there has been an explosion of research in this area, which is supporting a pet food revolution. By early 2026, there were 11 studies in dogs and three in cats, showing good health outcomes when vegan diets were used. They found that dogs and cats usually do just as well, and sometimes better, than when fed meat-based diets. Reductions in itchy skin, irritated ear canals and gastrointestinal problems were noted – these problems are very common, and reducing them can significantly improve quality of life. One large-scale study even showed that dogs fed vegan diets lived 1.5 years longer on average – equivalent to just over a decade of extra life, for a human!

However, pet carers do need to ensure that diets are nutritionally sound. Always use a reputable pet food company, and make sure that the packaging states that the food is nutritionally complete, rather than being intended solely as a treat or snack. The

company should be able to provide some basic information about steps taken to ensure nutritional soundness. For example, they might design their diets to meet nutritional guidelines from US or European authorities, or they might work with nutritional specialists to ensure all necessary nutrients are included. Some reasonable information should be available from the company website, or on request.

### Do pets enjoy it?

Surprisingly perhaps, given their carnivorous ancestral origins, dogs and cats seem to enjoy commercial vegan pet foods as much as those based on meat. In 2021, a colleague and I published a study of pet behaviour at feeding time. We analysed behavioural signs of palatability – the degree to which pets enjoy their food. Dogs, for example, will often race up to their food bowl, jump, bark, salivate and wag their tails. Cats are often more circumspect, and tend to engage in considerable flicking of ears or

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### Changing times

Globally, the benefits of such a transition could be enormous. Dogs and cats consume at least 9% of all farmed land animals, which rises to 20% in high pet owning nations such as the US. If all pet dogs were transitioned onto vegan diets, it could spare six billion land animals annually, with another billion spared if all pet cats were transitioned.

Billions of fish and marine animals could also be spared. If the dogs were transitioned, it could save

1.5 times the greenhouse gases produced by the UK each year, and food energy sufficient to feed 450 million additional people – the entire population of the EU. If all cats were moved to plant-based diets, around 70 million additional people could be fed – the population of the

UK. Although these benefits are all very large, they're nevertheless very conservative. For example, they rely on calculations describing 2018, when 78 billion land animals were killed annually for food. By 2023, the true figure was reportedly above 92 billion.

To achieve such benefits is easier than many pet parents realise. By changing diets gradually, most cats and dogs can be transitioned onto nutritionally sound vegan foods. The sense of smell is very important for these animals, so gently warming tinned or moist food can help, as this helps release odours pets find attractive. Various tasty additives can help, such as a little vegetable oil or nutritional yeast – other tips are available online. Even a partial transition can be well worth achieving, given the size and importance of the potential environmental and pet health benefits.

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tails, licking, sniffing and investigating, especially when a diet is new.

After studying over 2,300 dogs and 1,100 cats, we were able to determine which of these were positive signs (indicating pets enjoyed their meals), and which were negative signs. Next, we determined how positive and negative signs varied when pets were offered vegan and meat-based diets. There was very little difference overall. Individual pets have personalities and preferences, of course, just as people do. But when comparing 1000s of animals, and considering averages, it appears that dogs

and cats enjoy vegan diets as much as those made from meat.

This is fortunate, because nutritionally sound vegan pet diets offer benefits for farmed animals and the environment that are game-changingly large. We've long recognised that more sustainable diets are needed to address the unfolding climate emergency, and global environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. However, we've wrongly assumed this relates only to human diets. My most recent study determined that the average dog consumes 13 farmed land animals annually, compared to nine for a person – an increase of around 40%. The difference arises because a much greater proportion of an average dog's diet is supplied by animal-based ingredients. This takes account of the partial use of animal by-products within pet food. Hence, to save farmed animals and the environment, it does more good, on average, to transition your dog onto a nutritionally sound vegan diet, than a typical meat-eating human being.

