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Cuisine *de* Critters



By Phil Tripp (Pet Chef)

Sometimes it's frightening to see stories on the TV about pet foods. A recent Today Tonight show showed how many 'fresh meat' pet food packs have high levels of sulfur dioxide preservatives which can cause major problems by destroying thiamine. This can lead to dangerous or even fatal consequences. Though sensationalised, it still points to the need to be careful of what you feed your pets.

With the high quality of veterinary care and nutrition information or products available, pets are living longer and thus are at higher risk of developing old age diseases such as arthritis, kidney disease, joint problems, diabetes and even canine Alzheimers. Symptoms of these problems include bad breath, sleeping more, increased urination and drinking, plus changes in weight or behaviour. These could also be present for a number of other reasons.

We recently had to deal with this issue and now understand a lot more about senior nutrition and why there are a number of factors to consider in what to feed the older pet. It's why dog food manufacturers make different foods for senior pets with special formulations to slow down aging and help prevent the development of old-age diseases. For dogs older than seven years (equivalent to 50 human years), their diet should contain higher levels of antioxidants, high-quality protein, essential fatty acids, vitamins, minerals, and optimum levels of fibre. It should also be enriched with glucosamine and chondroitin sulphate to help support healthy joints and cartilage.

We've been diligent in feeding the best, freshest and varied foods to our pets with an eye to making sure we wash fruits and vegetables to remove pesticides, fertilisers or bacteria and also learning as much as we can about nutritional needs which vary from species to species and even within types of birds or dogs, as an example.

We've also been lucky that we haven't had any problems with our dogs and birds, even though we fed our dogs grapes, onions and macadamia nuts (fortunately not much!) before we discovered the error of our ways. And we've never fed chocolate which can also be toxic.

With the birds, we learned to be careful about feeding stonefruit pips which can contain naturally occurring arsenic compounds as well as apple pips. Each of the birds (Eclectus and Ringneck) have different dietary needs as is the case with nectar eating or carrion cleaners. But with our Dalmatians, we have had to be particularly diligent due to their propensity to have kidney problems as hereditary faults. And as they age, we have made sure they had nutrition to fight joint problems or arthritis.

We've always fed them canned sardines in oil and other fish with regularity which is what our vet attributes to our older girl Jerri (now 11) having the bones and joints of a dog around nine years. When Jerri started getting a little creaky last winter and had a hobble from a collision with a gravestone, Lisa started giving her a glucosamine and chondroitin powder after consulting with the vet. We've also tried nutraceuticals like Sascha's Blend joint formula, Joint Guard, Goochy's and MyBeau liquid multivitamin and mineral supplement (along with ground up mussel shells), and a blend of garlic powder and brewers yeast which is high in B vitamins and repels fleas.

And we've always made sure they have had lots of water, including topping up their food bowls when we've fed them kibbles or other food with water above the level of food. It forces them to drink and we believe keeps their kidneys flowing. We've also avoided foods which have oxalic acid in them—rhubarb, spinach, beet, chard and even starfruit and tea leaves are high in it. These can lead to crystals in the urine and kidney or bladderstones.

So imagine our surprise when we found ourselves in Texas, Jerri in a lovely boarding kennel back home in Sydney and a call late at night notified us that the observant staff had found crystals in her urine after seeing her having frequent short urinations. They had captured a specimen of her urine on the run (I could picture them chasing her with a cup!) and referred it to a vet. We had to make a long distance decision of what vet to have her seen by, what procedures to authorise (x-ray? extraction of urine by needle? More tests? Liver problem test? CAT Scan or MRI?) to determine both the seriousness and cause of the problem.

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Luckily, we didn't panic, had a long conversation with two vets overseeing her treatment and came to the decision that with the symptoms she had and us still being two weeks away from returning that she should go on a special prescriptive diet to bring her urinary pH down to normal—a treatment she might have to be on for the rest of her life. When we came home and saw the food, we felt terrible for Jerri as it looked and smelled extremely unpalatable, plus she could have no treats or additives.

We're happy to report that both the vets that treated her when the problem was discovered were correct in taking the action they did, and our own vet was willing to test her again, found her pH neutral, took her off the diet for a time to see if the problem recurs. We have to take her back for tests in a few weeks

but it underscores the need to remain vigilant in feeding and observing the habits of your pets—especially as they age. We're also convinced that as a pet approaches its twilight years, that bi-annual vet health checks should be carried out.

Over the past six issues, we've given a lot of nutritional advice and recipes for all types of animals (though we still have to come up with some reptile, ferret, snake, amphibian or crustacean snacks) but this time we've come up with a recipe for Bunny Bites and also repeating a winter recipe that has been the most popular one we've published—from our first issue—Dog Soup! Let's face it, dogs need their veggies too and serving it warm on a cold day is sure to bring a dog smile.

Dog Soup

Equipment Needed: Large Pot and cover, cutting board, knife, spoon, ladle, containers for freezing or extra large Ziplock bags.

- 4-8 liters water (but feel free to add V8, a small amount of fruit juice or non-meat, non milk liquids)
- one colander full of rinsed deep green leafy vegetables such as bok choy, carrot tops, brussel sprouts, beans, peas, etc *but avoid beet greens, spinach or broccoli as they are high in oxalic acid and go light on any cabbage which seems to produce flatulence.*
- root vegetables—a few carrots, sweet potatoes or kumera cut in cubes
- yellow-orange vegetables—a couple of cups of pumpkin or squash
- one cup of a grain—brown rice, barley, oatmeal, cous cous...
- one cup of a legume—dried beans, lentils, or better, fresh sprouted legumes
- optional—cup olive oil, flaxseed, other good nut/vegetable oil – avoid avocado & mac nut oils
- optional—a half cup of bran
- optional—a quarter cup of wheat grass juice or spirulina juice.

Method:

Fill large soup pot 2/3rds full with water and bring to boil.

Add any grains or beans and return to boil.

Simmer covered 20 minutes or so, then add root vegies.

Simmer covered for 20 minutes. Add water to keep level above solids.

Then add green vegetables and other ingredients

Simmer covered for a maximum of 20 minutes.

Let cool and refrigerate, to use half over one week perhaps every other day, (excellent added to dry food freezing the rest in containers (or Ziplock bags) for later use, thawing in a microwave, serving warm but not hot.

OK... last time we had Horse Muffins and this issue, we've nailed down a recipe for Bunny Bites.

While rabbits require a diet that is high in fibre and low in protein—including pellets, fresh hay and fresh vegetables, treats can be given very sparingly. Avoid high carbohydrates and never feed human snack foods. No salt, no sugar. A diet for rabbits needs to be consistent as they don't tolerate changes.

Bunny Bites (Can be frozen)

- 1/2 cup plain, unsugared, unflavoured yoghurt
- 1/4 cup crushed or minced dried fruits (banana chips, apricots, raisins, pears, apples, pineapples or berries) but not ones that are preserved with sulfur dioxide
- 1/8 cup (raw, unsalted) nut pieces crushed
- 2 Tbs shredded carrot
- 2 Tbs minced parsley
- 2 Tbs minced broccoli or broccolini
- 2 Tbs bran
- 1 Tbs Spirulina (optional)

Method:

Combine ingredients in bowl, let sit for one hour for solid ingredients to absorb moisture from yoghurt. Form into small (string bean sized) rolls and bake in ungreased non-stick pan at 150 degrees C for ten minutes. Let cool and put in zip lock bags to freeze.

Remember not to add honey or sugar, no fat, oil or seeds and feed in limited quantities as it is a snack and should not be a substitute for a proper rabbit diet.



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