

Rebecca L. Remillard, DVM, PhD, Diplomate ACVN

Homemade Diets

You have asked...

My clients are asking about homemade diets for their pets—how should I respond?



Illustration by Bill Celandor

The expert says...

If you have a sense that more clients are asking you about the safety of commercial diets and the benefits of feeding alternative diets, you are not alone. Most practitioners can attest that clients are increasingly interested in “natural,” “organic,” and “homemade” meals; however, practitioners often do not have sufficient knowledge to assist these clients.

Safety & Suitability

Whether justified or not, pet food and treat recalls have contributed to a growing number of owners questioning the safety of the pet food supply.¹⁻³ In addition, pet owners are interested in homemade diets because of concerns about additives and preservatives, inability to understand pet food label ingredients, and lack of suitable commercial products for a pet’s medical conditions. This last category can present problems for practitioners as well (eg, a pet with a history of pancreatitis that also forms calcium oxalate uroliths).

To be clear, no diet (whether homemade, commercial, or organic) is guaranteed to be 100% safe. In fact, some may argue that homemade diets make food safety even less likely. When discussing diet options with clients, it is helpful for practitioners to determine the reasons for the owner’s inquiry. If a client’s desire to pursue a homemade diet is based on misinformation, client education may persuade the owner to continue feeding a commercial pet food.

Providing Advice

However, clients are also becoming increasingly dissatisfied with practitioners who routinely and automatically recommend (and sell) 1 or 2 commercial brands and will not consider diet alternatives. For clients determined to make their own pet food, veterinarians should be willing to work with them and locate resources that provide practical advice about home-cooked diets for a reasonable fee. It is not necessary to take a hard stance against homemade diets and risk losing a client when nutritional expertise is available.

According to pet owners, veterinarians are still the best source of health care advice for their pets. Yet data from 2002 survey suggested that although owners want the veterinarian to provide a specific nutritional recommendation, they usually do not receive such advice. The American Animal Hospital Association Compliance Study found that 55% of clients purchased a recommended therapeutic pet food, whereas less than 5% declined the food recommendation because of cost. Fifty-nine percent of all dogs and cats in the same study were diagnosed with a condition for which a therapeutic diet would be beneficial, yet compliance was only about 12%.⁴

This situation need not stand—veterinarians can access consultation services from veterinary nutritionists, veterinary colleges, referral practices, and therapeutic food manufacturers to bring nutritional expertise into their practice, just as they do when a patient requires more advanced diagnostic imaging, surgery, or internal medicine expertise.

continues

Finding an Expert

Clients do not necessarily expect their primary care veterinarian to have expertise in all areas of veterinary medicine, but many clients do expect the veterinarian to work with specialists as needed. The American Veterinary Medical Association sanctioned the College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN) in 1988, and there are now at least 60 veterinarians with expertise in veterinary nutrition. Approximately one third of these specialists are directly available to veterinarians and will consult on cases.

Veterinarians should also keep in mind that not all diets found on the Internet are suspect. Two websites, for example, are overseen by ACVN diplomates and offer pet owners homemade diet recipes for a nominal fee (see **Aids & Resources**). These websites clearly state that diet recipes are for pets with no medical issues, including obesity. The client enters the pet's information, selects recipe ingredients, and then downloads a diet guaranteed to be complete and balanced. These websites offer a nutritionally sound alternative for most clients with healthy pets of optimal weight who ask for homemade diet recommendations.

Accommodating Medical Issues

Homemade diets formulated for a healthy pet can often be modified to accommodate different medical conditions as they arise. The modifications may consist of relatively small changes as opposed to changing to a different commercial product. For example, as the pet ages and gains weight or develops a condition such as early renal insufficiency, nutrient levels can be altered as needed (eg, by decreasing fat or phosphorus).

In addition, homemade diets can be a very effective tool for patients with food allergy. A simple homemade diet consisting of 1 or 2 foods can be used initially to diagnose food allergy or intolerance. If such a trial is successful, appropriate nonflavored supplements are prescribed to balance that diet for long-term feeding.

The Benefits

Feeding homemade diets gives clients a greater sense of direct involvement in the care of their pets. Whether a pet is healthy or ill, some clients want to be involved in the total care of their pets, which includes preparing their meals. For a growing number of clients the disadvantages of a homemade diet (including cost; time-consuming preparation; and inconvenience when the pet is boarded, hospitalized, or traveling) are outweighed by the knowledge, confidence, and greater sense of control they have over what they are feeding their pets.

The primary care veterinarian should, if possible, accommodate the client's decisions while remaining an advocate for the pet. A willingness to address the owner's concerns and help the owner find a healthy diet solution can only strengthen the veterinarian-client relationship.

The pet owner may then become a better client, with a renewed level of confidence in a veterinarian who helped obtain a feeding plan backed by a nutritionist. Your practice benefits when you can accommodate such client requests, not only from improved client communication but also increased revenue from incorporating nutrition consultants and selling appropriate supplements. ■



See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.

Article archived on cliniciansbrief.com