

# Treat Feeding Your Dog

by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

A study of dog treat feeding guidelines was recently conducted by veterinarians at the University of Padua in Italy and published in the journal *Veterinary Record*. The results prompted this recommendation from lead study author Dr. Giada Morelli:

*"Pet treat producers should reconsider the feeding instructions provided on labels as we demonstrated that usually they exceed the 10 percent maintenance energy requirements (MER) suggested by the literature. For the MER calculation of an average dog we considered a formula which took into account sterilization and sedentary life, which are the major factors contributing to pet obesity that is a growing problem for pets."*

Translation for pet parents: Suggested feeding amounts for commercially available processed dog treats should be adjusted downward, and especially if your dog:

- Has been spayed or neutered
- Doesn't get much or any exercise
- Is overweight or obese

I'll take this suggestion even further and recommend that if you're feeding processed pet treats, it's important for both your dog's weight and his overall health to transition him to small amounts of healthier snacks (more about this shortly).

## Dog Treat Feeding Instructions Can Lead to Obesity and Other Potential Health Problems

The study looked at a variety of commercial dog treats, including four biscuits, nine tender treats, two meat-based strips, five rawhides, eight chewable sticks and four dental care sticks. The treats are available in many countries, and were produced primarily by Purina, Pedigree, Friskies, Royal Canin, Trixie, Vitakraft and Bayer.

The researchers analyzed the treats for nutrient composition and minerals, hydroxyproline (an amino acid found in collagen), starch, glucose, fructose and sucrose. They found that 76 percent of treats contained four to nine ingredients, and those ingredients weren't precisely described on the label.

Examples: The biscuits and dental sticks listed "cereals" as the first ingredient; the tenders, meat strips, rawhides and chewable sticks listed "meat and animal derivatives" first; and almost half the treats contained unspecified "sugars." The researchers concluded that if dog parents followed the feeding instructions on package labels, the treats would account for a significant percentage of their pet's daily energy needs, as follows:

- Dog biscuits = 16 percent for dogs of any size
- Rawhides = over 25 percent for small and 18 percent for medium-sized dogs
- Chewable sticks = more than 10 percent for dogs of any size, up to 16.9 percent for small dogs

Only dental sticks came in below the recommended 10 percent for all dog sizes (but have you evaluated the ingredients in dental sticks?). The researchers also discovered mineral contents varied among treats, which could pose a problem for dogs eating mineral-restricted diets. In addition, the rawhide treats contained high levels of hydroxyproline, which could be problematic for dogs predisposed to bladder stones.

## A Word About Rawhide Treats

These are among my least-favorite treats for dogs. Not only are rawhide chews high in calories, but they're often found on lists of pet poisons and have other problems as well.

## 5 Tips for Offering Healthy Amounts of Healthy Treats to Your Dog

Fortunately, these days you can find commercially available all-natural treats formulated without grain, animal by-products or GM ingredients. However, it's important to keep in mind that many high-quality commercial treats still contain some type of starch, which isn't ideal.

My recommendation is to always use pure human-grade protein as treats, when possible. About the most basic (and well-loved) protein-only treat is good 'ol cooked, cubed chicken breast. It's cheap, easy and simple. There are plenty of higher-end freeze-dried and dehydrated 100 percent meat treats on the market, but you still need to do research to identify sourcing and purity.

The following recommendations will help you select safe, wholesome commercial treats for your canine companion, as well as how much to feed.

### **1. Don't Overfeed Treats to Your Pet**

Treats, even very healthy ones, should make up less than 10 percent of your dog's daily food intake. Try to limit them to training and behavior rewards, as a bedtime ritual, or as a "time to get in your crate" enticement. Treats should be offered primarily as rewards during training exercises or other similar activities, and not because the rest of the family is having a snack.

It's important to remember that treats aren't a complete form of nutrition and should never be used in place of nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate meals. Overfeeding treats on top of daily food intake will result in an obese pet, and overfeeding treats while underfeeding balanced meals will result in nutritional deficiencies.

## **2.Treats Should Be Sourced in the U.S. and Made in the U.S.**

Legally, pet food manufacturers can make the "made in the USA" claim as long as the product was assembled in this country — even if the ingredients are imported. So when you're shopping for safe treats, it's not enough that a product claims to be made in the U.S. You want to be sure all the ingredients originated here as well.

The U.S., of course, produces its own share of tainted products, but as a general rule, the contaminating agent is quickly identified and immediate action is taken to remove the product from store shelves. I strongly recommend avoiding any product containing ingredients sourced from China, however, I've found several excellent-quality treats from New Zealand and Canada. It's important to know and trust your treat company's commitment to purity and quality control.

## **3.Treats Should Be High-Quality**

A high-quality pet treat will not contain grains or unnecessary fillers, rendered animal by-products, added sugar (sometimes hidden in ingredients like molasses and honey), chemicals, artificial preservatives or ingredients known to be highly allergenic to pets. These criteria rule out the vast majority of commercial pet treats on the market.

Most high-quality, human-grade pet food producers, which are typically smaller companies, also make a few types of treats. So if you're already feeding your dog or cat a high-quality commercial pet food you trust, see if the manufacturer also makes treats. Another option is to shop online, especially if you've done your research and know exactly what you're looking for.

## **4.Offer Fresh Human Foods as Treats**

I recommend avoiding all grain-based treats. With the advent of "grain-free" pet food have come "grain-free" pet treats, which trick you into thinking they're better or healthier.

Grain-free does not mean starch free. Most crunchy, grain-free pet treats use high-glycemic non-grain starch to hold the treats together. Potato, tapioca, peas and lentils are sources of hidden sugar in treats your pet doesn't need. Your dog has no biological requirement for the carbs in these treats, and in addition, they are pro-inflammatory. Instead, offer fresh human foods.

Berries are a great treat because they're small and loaded with antioxidants. You can also offer small amounts — no more than a one-eighth-inch square for a small dog and a one-fourth-inch square for bigger dogs — of other fruits (melons and apples, for example) as well as cheese. Excellent training treats for dogs include frozen peas and raw almonds, cashews and other safe nuts (never macadamia nuts) for bigger dogs, and raw sunflower seeds for smaller dogs.

## **5.Prepare Homemade Treats for your Pet**

If your dog loves dehydrated chicken strips (chicken jerky), you can make your own quite easily to avoid potentially tainted store-bought jerky treats. Just buy some boneless chicken breasts, clean them and slice into long, thin strips (the thinner the

better). Place the strips on a greased or nonstick cookie sheet and bake them for at least three hours at 180 degrees.

The low temperature dries the chicken out slowly, and the strips wind up nice and chewy. After removing the strips from the oven, let them cool and then store them in plastic bags or another airtight container. You can also freeze them. If you buy human-grade commercial canned food for your dog, you can "repurpose" a can for use as a supply of healthy treats. Open a can and spoon out little treat-sized amounts onto a baking sheet covered with parchment paper.

Put the baking sheet into the freezer until the bite-sized bits of food are frozen. Move them to an airtight container and put them back into the freezer until you're ready to offer them to your dog. For more ideas on preparing special homemade treats for your furry companion over the holidays, be sure to request my free e-book "Homemade Treats for Healthy Pets," which is loaded with nutritious, super-simple recipes for both cats and dogs.