

# The “LOW-DOWN” on Alternative Pet Diets

Even before the pet food recall by Menu Foods and the resulting animal deaths of 2007, many pet owners had been in search of alternatives to regular store-bought foods for their animal companions. Seeking safer, healthier ways to feed their dogs, cats, and other furry friends, many consumers are dabbling in new diets, whether it's alternative commercial pet foods, home-cooked, raw, and even vegetarian diets.

But are any of these options safe for your pet? And how do you know for sure whether they're getting the nutrition they need? Make an informed and healthy choice for your pets by learning the pros and cons of each option here.

## Alternative commercial pet foods

Much like regular pet foods, commercially-made alternative foods usually come in either canned or dry kibble but with slight differences. They will be formulated with natural and organic ingredients and they could also be made with human food-grade ingredients.

While these options should help you to avoid additives, artificial colorings and flavorings, as well as questionable preservatives, knowing the real deal from the fakes can be tricky. At this point, there are no government standards for defining “human-grade” foods and a certified organic label for pet food is still pending. At the very least, be sure that whatever pet food you choose has been tested by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) for meeting minimum nutritional requirements.

## Home-cooked pet foods

Believing that they can produce a much healthier, more natural product at home, many pet owners are turning to DIY pet food recipes. Experts say that

while it is certainly feasible to create a balanced, nutrition-packed diet for your pets at home, there are a few precautions to note.

While there are many recipes online claiming to be healthy for your pets, without specialized veterinary expertise to back them up, it is virtually impossible to know whether your pet will get all of the vitamins, minerals, protein, and other nutrients they require, especially if they have special health concerns. For that reason, animal health practitioners strongly recommend that you consult a veterinary nutritionist. Also bear in mind that it may be difficult to source all of the ingredients you require and will likely require a greater investment of both your time and your money.

Nevertheless, when done right, preparing home-cooked pet foods has several benefits. Most importantly, by controlling the ingredient list, you can determine exactly what goes on the menu from day to day. And your pets will likely thank you for it since the flavor of homemade food is often preferred by pets.

## Raw food pet diets

Another trend in the world of pet food is the raw food movement. Although it may be true that a raw food diet is more “natural” for those dogs and cats existing in the wild, veterinary experts caution that there are some serious health risks associated with this option.

The most troubling problem: bacteria. Several published studies have demonstrated that pathogenic bacteria such as salmonella have been found in the stool of pets on raw food diets. While these bacteria can cause illness in your pet, they pose a greater risk to the humans co-habiting with the animals since the bacteria is viable in their stool.



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Additionally, although raw food diets may provide some added phytochemicals not found in commercially prepared foods, they will likely be deficient in other nutritional requirements. Although the jury is still out on this pet diet option, most vets don't recommend it.

## Vegetarian pet diets

Humans eating a vegetarian diet themselves may also be tempted to try their pets on a meat-free regimen. Here again is a contentious issue among animal experts. Like other alternative diets, it may be difficult to ensure proper nutrition for your pet on a vegetarian menu consisting of beans, lentils, millet, grains, and legumes. The addition of synthetic nutrients may be required to ensure your pet receives all of the basic building blocks she needs.

Cats in particular are considered true carnivores and therefore require several essential nutrients found only in animal ingredients. Dogs on the other hand are classified as omnivores so vegetarian diets may be more feasible for them. In either case, animal health professions strongly recommend that you consult a nutritionist versed in canine or feline diets to ensure your pet remains healthy on meat-free foods.

That's the repeating thread throughout the alternative pet food journey. If you've got the time and resources to put together a made-at-home or alternative diet, it definitely can be done, but will require a whole-hearted commitment to the process and the guiding hand of an expert. ☺