

Spoiled Rotten: Human food and your pet

When you first take that adorable puppy or kitten home, you just want to give him everything he could possibly want. A lot of the time, what he really wants is the food off your plate. And who can blame him? You're eating a steak dinner, with all those colorful veggies and that yummy smelling gravy, and he's got the same old dry kibble he's been eating his whole life. He's going to look up at you with those big eyes and you're not going to be able to resist him anyway, so don't feel bad. We're about to tell you something that you don't hear very often, and that is this: it's okay to feed human food to your pets, as long as you take the time to find out what is, and isn't, safe.

The idea that human food and pets should never cross paths is more a product of the pet food industry than anything else; after all, if everybody thought it was ok to just let Fido join in the fun, nobody would be buying pet food. Many people cook for their pets every day, and with enough know-how, it can be the best diet a pet could hope for; but then again, that's a lot of extra food and a lot of extra work, and most people barely manage to cook for themselves on a daily basis.

If you're *not* planning on cooking dinner for your pets, but you do want to let them have a taste every now and again, here are some tips for pulling it off without creating a begging or demanding pet. First, don't give your pet food directly from your plate. Instead, dish it out separately; have a dish or pet bowl that you use just for "special" foods and/or canned food. Your pet will learn to recognize the dish, and know something awesome is on its way, but it will still be a part of their dinner area and dinner routine – in other words, not something that they have to whine for, or get up on your dining table to get. Second, know what's healthy and what's not:

Healthy Treats:

- 🐾 Green beans
- 🐾 Carrot sticks
- 🐾 Cucumber slices
- 🐾 Zucchini slices
- 🐾 Apple slices (Remove the seeds – they're toxic!)
- 🐾 Well-cooked and de-boned lean meats (De-boning is especially important with fish,

whose small, sharp bones present a serious choking and internal injury risk)

- 🐾 Baked potato or sweet potato (Avoid unripe or green potatoes)
- 🐾 Bread (No raisins, no raw dough)
- 🐾 Unsalted pretzels
- 🐾 Bananas
- 🐾 Unsalted almonds
- 🐾 Cooked pasta
- 🐾 Peanut butter

Things to avoid at all costs:

- 🐾 Chocolate, coffee, or other caffeine sources: These contain chemicals called methylxanthines, which can cause vomiting, diarrhea, excessive thirst, excessive urination, panting, hyperactivity, abnormal heart rhythm, tremors, seizures, and death. Dark chocolate is more dangerous than milk chocolate.
- 🐾 Alcohol: All kinds of alcohol can cause vomiting, diarrhea, decreased coordination, central nervous system depression, difficulty breathing, tremors, abnormal blood acidity, coma, and death.
- 🐾 Avocado: Leaves, fruit, seeds, and bark of the avocado plant contain Persin, which can cause vomiting and diarrhea in dogs. Birds and rodents react much more strongly, developing congestion, difficulty breathing, and fluid accumulation around the heart.

- 🐾 **Macadamia nuts:** Another problem food for dogs, macadamia nuts can cause weakness, depression, vomiting, tremors, and heat stroke.
- 🐾 **Grapes and raisins:** The toxin in grapes and raisins is unknown, but they can cause kidney failure; in animals with compromised health, the onset can be very, fast and devastating.
- 🐾 **Yeast dough:** Raw dough can rise and cause gas accumulation in a pet's digestive system, which causes a great deal of pain and can cause the stomach or intestines to rupture.
- 🐾 **Raw or undercooked meat, eggs, and bones:** The main concern here is disease; meat and eggs can carry bacteria like *Salmonella* and *Escherichia coli*, and any undercooked or raw meat has the potential to pass parasites on to your pet. Raw bones can splinter and puncture your pet's digestive tract, and also present a choking hazard.
- 🐾 **Xylitol:** This is a sweetener used in many candies, baked goods, toothpastes, and gums. It can cause insulin release, signs of which include vomiting, lethargy, loss of coordination and motor skills, recumbancy, and seizures. Xylitol can also lead to liver failure.
- 🐾 **Onions, garlic, and chives:** Although delicious, these three can cause gastrointestinal irritation and even damage red blood cells. Cats are more susceptible, but dogs are also at risk if a large amount is consumed.
- 🐾 **Milk:** The classic image of a cat drinking out of a saucer of milk is a bit misleading. Pets do not possess significant amounts of the enzyme that breaks down milk after they mature, and milk and other dairy products can cause diarrhea or other digestive issues.

Once you know what's okay to try, experiment a little: find out what your pet likes! This information can be invaluable down the road if you have to give medication; while cats can't generally be fooled by a pill tucked into a chunk of tuna, a dog will usually gulp down a tasty treat without a second thought about what medicines may be lurking inside.

People food can also be a helpful tool when you're training a pet; try reserving his favorite treats for rewards when he succeeds at the things he's having the most trouble with. A little extra food incentive never hurt anybody! And it can even be a valuable tool when you're working with a dog that suffers from separation anxiety. Try stuffing a Kong® toy with his favorite things – spaghetti and meat sauce, peanut butter, veggies, whatever he prefers – and freezing it. Give him the frozen Kong ® right when you're leaving the house, and it will help him learn that your departure isn't a reason to panic, but instead means that he's going to have some tasty treats that he can gnaw on for ages.