

A hand from the top left corner holds a rolled-up scroll. A dog, likely a Weimaraner, sits on the right side of the frame, looking up at the scroll. The background is plain white.

What's so Natural about Natural?

By Doug Knueven DVM CVA CVC CVCH

Holistic therapies are said to be natural because they work with the body's natural mechanisms. For example, chiropractic adjustments gently realign the spine so the animal's nervous and musculoskeletal systems can return to normal function. Herbs can modulate organ and tissue metabolism back to their healthy state. When acupuncture needles are placed in specific spots on the body, they send signals to the brain to release innate healing chemicals. Because natural therapies such as these work with the body, we see fewer side effects and more robust wellness than is seen with conventional veterinary care. So natural is good, right?

It does seem that the farther we stray away from Mother Nature, the more trouble we get ourselves - and our pets - into. For example, the unnaturally sedentary lifestyle of Americans not only negatively affects their health, it also leads to canine obesity and behavior problems. Feeding cats dry food goes against their nature to eat high moisture, low carb prey animals and contributes to obesity, diabetes, urinary crystals, and kidney disease. Yes, natural is better.

Nature vs Natural

Unfortunately the word natural, especially when applied to all things related to pet diet and health, has become a bit of a buzzword. We have "natural" pet foods with "natural" ingredients like "natural" flavors. There are also "natural" supplements, natural shampoos and even natural pet magazines. It leads one to wonder what it really means to be natural.

The word natural can be defined as something relating to or derived from nature. This word is often thought of as the opposite of synthetic. Something is synthetic if it has been removed from nature and chemically manipu-

lated by man. So we consider grain grown in Mother Nature's soil to be natural, while plastic is synthetic. Of course, who eats corn on the cob without first cooking it or subjecting it to some other, more extreme processing? Since we've changed the corn from its natural state, is it still natural? And what of plastic? It's made from petroleum products that come from dead dinosaurs. What could be more natural than that?

Corn Today, Plastic Tomorrow

So there seems to be a spectrum of naturalness. While we would all agree that an ear of corn is natural and a plastic cup is synthetic, where do we draw the line between the two? Is corn always natural, no matter how it's been processed? The naturalness of corn ranges from an ear of corn, to ground corn, to corn flakes, to high fructose corn syrup, to corn plastic used in biodegradable packaging. I would suggest that somewhere in that progression, the corn has ceased to be natural.

The same thing can be said for natural pet foods. Sure, grain, potatoes, or any source of starch could be considered natural ingredients. They may even be organic. But, after the high heat processing and extrusion, their naturalness has been corrupted. Even more importantly, it's extremely unnatural for dogs or cats to eat large amounts of starch in any form. As far as I'm concerned, calling any processed kibble natural is very misleading.

Natural Flavors And Other Tricks

The natural ingredients in natural pet foods often include natural flavors. Chemicals used as natural flavors are derived from more natural sources than are artificial flavors. However, the processing of the raw materials into the flavor chemicals results in unnatural end products that resemble MSG in character. If the natural flavors are so natural why doesn't the label just come right out and say exactly what they are? In my view, natural flavors aren't all that natural.

Some natural pet foods are proud that there are no preservatives in their ingredient lists. Unfortunately, that can be another deceptive ploy. If a pet food manufacturer buys a raw material like fat, and then adds a harmful preservative like ethoxyquin (which has been linked to cancer and other deadly diseases), then ethoxyquin must be listed as an ingredient. On the other hand, if the company buys fat that's already preserved with ethoxyquin, then the ingredient list doesn't need to include that chemical. Just one more way that even the ingredient lists on pet food labels can be misleading.

Notes For Raw Feeders

Those of us who know that processed pet foods aren't natural, no matter what the packaging says, choose raw foods. The wild counterparts of our pets eat uncooked prey animals, so raw pet foods are certainly the natural way to go. While this concept is certainly true, it can often be difficult to mimic Mother Nature.

Raw pet foods, whether homemade or commercial, are made to mimic the carnivore's natural diets. Wild canines do indeed eat prey that they catch. But they don't just eat the muscle, bones and organs. Research shows that the stomach contents of wild carnivores indicate diets high in indigestible animal parts (like the skin and fur) and low in caloric density. In fact, I've heard from zoo vets that often the bones a wolf consumes come out the other end wrapped in the prey animal's pelt.

Dogs evolved eating foods that were contaminated with bacteria. This is how they continuously dosed themselves with probiotics. It also explains why they can handle a high level of bacteria in what they consume. Let's face it, even the most fastidiously raised dog gets a mouthful of poop or drinks out of a stagnant puddle once in a while, usually with no ill effects.

How many of us feed raw foods containing lots of indigestible material? The high calorie density of the raw food we feed could be the reason that these Atkins-like diets often fail to keep the excess pounds off our pets. It can also explain why these diets sometimes lead to constipation.

Besides freshly caught prey, wild canine carnivores also commonly eat carrion – dead animals that have been lying around in the hot sun for days, marinating in bacteria. Just in case the carcass doesn't have enough bacteria, carnivores will often bury their food for a few days to enhance the fermentation process. (The idea that they bury their food to hide it is absurd when you consider the olfactory abilities of the competing carnivores).

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Unfortunately, the FDA recently mandated a zero tolerance for salmonella in pet foods, including raw diets. They did this despite the fact that up to 36% of healthy dogs shed salmonella in their stool. This FDA mandate has forced many raw food manufacturers to turn to high pressure pasteurization (HPP) to keep their food from being recalled. HPP is a way of using pressure to kill bacteria. I have many concerns about HPP.

First of all, HPP is basically a way of sterilizing the food. As I've shown, dogs evolved eating food that is swimming in bacteria. It's against their nature to eat germ-free food. Also, if there's enough pressure to kill bacteria, what is it doing to the natural nutrients in the raw materials? Is HPP simply cooking the food with pressure? Finally, the containers used in the HPP process are often plastic. This raises the concern that toxins from the plastic could be driven into the food by this procedure.

Please indulge me while I take the idea of raising dogs naturally one step further. Researchers are now finding that human autoimmune diseases can be successfully treated by infesting the patient with intestinal worms. Considering the epidemic of autoimmune diseases affecting our pets these days, we need to ask the question, could our wormophobia be part of the reason so many pets contract autoimmune diseases? How far down the natural path are we

willing to go? By the way, I'm not suggesting that it's a good thing for pets to have parasites.

In the end, we must face the fact that we've created an unnatural living environment for our pets by having them live with us in our homes instead of running wild in virgin woods and fields. I personally wouldn't have it any other way – natural or not. You can help your dogs live a more natural life by feeding them a natural raw diet, dosing them regularly with a broad range of probiotics and giving them plenty of exercise. I also think it's best to avoid HPP foods. Finally, consider that if we can't or won't feed our dogs their meat complete with fur and feet, our dogs may benefit from extra veggies in their diets to provide plant fiber to mimic the indigestible animal parts in a natural diet, lowering the food's caloric density and decreasing constipation. And, of course, seek holistic medical care.

When it comes to caring for our pets, there is a range of naturalness. My weird, inner purist would have us all throwing rotten, worm-infested rabbit carcasses all over our kitchens for our dogs to eat. But, the realist inside me says, just do the best you can. 🐾



Doug Knueven has been practicing veterinary medicine in Beaver County, PA since 1987 and practicing alternative veterinary medicine since 1995. He lectures at state and national veterinary conferences. He has written two books: Stand by Me: A Holistic Handbook for Animals, Their People and the Lives They Share Together, and The Holistic Health Guide: Natural Care for the Whole Dog.

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