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The Ultimate Guide to Dog Food

Should you feed your dog human food? What foods are toxic? Does kibble provide enough nutrition? Experts weigh in on your most pressing dog nutrition questions

By Matt Alderton, AARP
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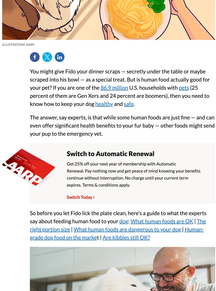

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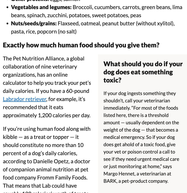
So before you let Fido lick the plate clean, here's a guide to what the experts say about feeding human food to your dog: What human foods are OK? | The right portion size | What human foods are dangerous to your dog | Human-grade dog food on the market | Are kibbles still OK?



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An apple a day — and other dog-friendly options — can keep the vet away

For dog parents who want to optimize their pet's nutrition, introducing human foods as treats and meal toppers can be a good place to start. And most foods are OK.

"With very few exceptions, your dog will thrive on the same healthy foods you enjoy," says veterinary homeopath Jan Allegretti, founder of holistic Animal Health and Advocacy and author of *The Fresh & Flexible Meal Plan: The Easiest, Most Nutritious Way to Feed Your Dog and Cat*.

What, specifically, can you feed your Fido? The veterinarians interviewed for this piece agree that the following "human" foods are generally safe for dogs.

- **Fruits:** Apples, applesauce, bananas, blueberries, peaches, strawberries, watermelon
- **Meat:** Chicken, duck, turkey, beef, veal
- **Other proteins:** Eggs, salmon
- **Vegetables and legumes:** Broccoli, cucumbers, carrots, green beans, lima beans, spinach, zucchini, potatoes, sweet potatoes, peas
- **Nuts/seeds/grains:** Flaxseed, oatmeal, peanut butter (without xylitol), pasta, rice, popcorn (no salt)

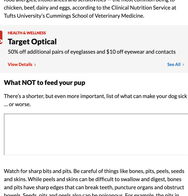
Exactly how much human food should you give them?

The Pet Nutrition Alliance, a global collaboration of nine veterinary organizations, has an online calculator to help you track your pet's daily calories. If you have a 60-pound Labrador retriever, for example, it's recommended that it eats approximately 1,200 calories per day.

If you're using human food along with kibble — as a treat or topper — it should constitute no more than 10 percent of a dog's daily calories, according to Danielle Ojeetz, a doctor of companion animal nutrition at pet food company Fromm Family Foods. That means that Lab could have roughly 120 calories' worth of treats — for example, half a banana (50 calories), a few baby carrots (20 calories) and a half tablespoon of peanut butter (50 calories).

What should you do if your dog does eat something toxic?

If your dog ingests something they shouldn't, call your veterinarian immediately. "For most of the foods listed here, there is a threshold amount — usually dependent on the weight of the dog — that becomes a medical emergency. So if your dog does get ahold of a toxic food, give your vet or poison control a call to see if they need urgent medical care or just monitoring at home," says Margo Hennet, a veterinarian at BARK, a pet product company.



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Smaller serving size. Keep in mind that whole foods tend to be more digestible than processed foods, which means dogs may require smaller servings to satisfy their nutritional needs, says veterinarian Brett Levitzke, chief medical officer at Get Jay, a maker of fresh, human-grade dog food. Eating too much can lead to weight gain and obesity, he notes.

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Food allergies are another consideration

Before you change your dog's diet, consider whether it has any underlying health conditions or dietary restrictions. "Some dogs may experience digestive upset or allergic reactions to certain ingredients found in fresh foods," Levitzke cautions. This is true even of approved foods. Just like humans, dogs may have food allergies, intolerances and sensitivities — the most common being to chicken, beef, dairy and eggs, according to the Clinical Nutrition Service at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine.

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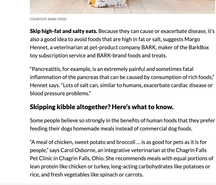

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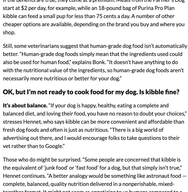
What NOT to feed your pup

There's a shorter, but even more important, list of what can make your dog sick ... or worse.

Watch for sharp bits and pits. Be careful of things like bones, pits, peels, seeds and skins. While peels and skins can be difficult to swallow and digest, bones and pits have sharp edges that can break teeth, puncture organs and obstruct bowels. Seeds, pits and peels also can be poisonous. For example, the pits in stone fruits like peaches, cherries and mangoes contain naturally occurring cyanide, as do the seeds in apples, pears and persimmons. "If you wouldn't eat it yourself, don't feed it to your dog," Allegretti says.

There are also specific foods pet owners should avoid outright because they're toxic to dogs. Although you should always check with your vet before feeding your dog any human food, that list includes the following.

- Alcohol
- Avocado
- Chocolate
- Coffee and tea
- Grapes, raisins and currants
- Macadamia nuts
- Onions and garlic
- Xylitol (an artificial sweetener common in nut butters, breath mints, chewing gum and sugar-free desserts)



COURTESY BARK FOOD

Skip high-fat and salty eats. Because they can cause or exacerbate disease, it's also a good idea to avoid foods that are high in fat or salt, suggests Margo Hennet, a veterinarian at pet-product company BARK, maker of the BarkBox toy subscription service and BARK brand foods and treats.

"Pancreatitis, for example, is an extremely painful and sometimes fatal inflammation of the pancreas that can be caused by consumption of rich foods," Hennet says. "Lots of salt can, similar to humans, exacerbate cardiac disease or blood pressure problems."

Skipping kibble altogether? Here's what to know.

Some people believe so strongly in the benefits of human foods that they prefer feeding their dogs homemade meals instead of commercial dog foods.

"A meal of chicken, sweet potato and broccoli ... is as good for your dog as it is for people," says Carol Osborne, an integrative veterinarian at the Chagrin Falls Pet Clinic in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. She recommends meals with equal portions of lean protein like chicken or turkey, long-acting carbohydrates like potatoes or rice, and fresh vegetables like spinach or carrots.

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There has not been a great deal of research on just how good fresh food is for dogs, but early studies are promising. In a 2021 study, researchers at the University of Helsinki looked at the impact of diet on skin-related allergies in more than 4,000 dogs. Puppies that regularly ate fresh food had fewer allergies as adults, they found, while those that ate only or mostly processed foods ended up with more allergies.

Because humans and dogs have different dietary needs, preparing healthy homemade meals might not be as simple as it seems. "You need to be careful making dog food at home unless you've had the help of a veterinary nutritionist to formulate a complete and balanced diet," says Chyrle Bonk, a veterinarian at Clearwater Valley Veterinary Clinic in Orofino, Idaho, and a veterinary consultant for Pet Keen, an informational website for pet owners. "Dogs have specific nutritional needs, which include a variety of foods in the right proportions. You can't just give them any old human foods and expect them to be fine. If you want to feed a human-grade diet, the safest best is to purchase it from a commercial company."

Commercial providers of fresh, human-grade dog food such as the Farmer's Dog, Ollie, Get Joy and the Honest Kitchen claim to offer superior nutrition. Unlike homemade meals, they point out, their products are formulated by experts. And compared to kibble, they're less processed.

As head veterinarian at the Farmer's Dog, Brandon Stapleton partners with the company's R&D teams to design and test nutritious products. He maintains that fresh ingredients — including those in commercial human-grade dog food — are more digestible and better for dogs because they can take in more nutrients.

If the benefits are true, they come at a premium: Meals from the Farmer's Dog start at $2 per day, for example, while an 18-pound bag of Purina Pro Plan kibble can feed a small pup for less than 75 cents a day. A number of other cheaper options are available, depending on the brand you buy and where you shop.

Still, some veterinarians suggest that human-grade dog food isn't automatically better. "Human-grade dog foods simply mean that the ingredients used could also be used for human food," explains Bonk. "It doesn't have anything to do with the nutritional value of the ingredients, so human-grade dog foods aren't necessarily more nutritious or better for your dog."

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OK, but I'm not ready to cook food for my dog. Is kibble fine?

It's about balance. "If your dog is happy, healthy, eating a complete and balanced diet, and loving their food, you have no reason to change your choices," stresses Hennet, who says kibble can be more convenient and affordable than fresh dog foods and often is just as nutritious. "There's a lot of marketing and advertising out there, and I would encourage folks to take questions to their vet rather than to Google."

Those who do might be surprised. "Some people are concerned that kibble is the equivalent of 'junk food' or 'fast food' for a dog, but that simply isn't true," Hennet continues. "A better analogy would be something like astronaut food — complete, balanced, quality nutrition delivered in a nonperishable, mixed-together format. It might not seem as appetizing to us humans compared to a meal at a restaurant, but the nutritional benefits are actually the same."

Not all kibble is created equal. To assess quality, look at the label, suggests Kelly Kanaras, director of communications and membership at the Pet Food Institute, a trade group representing pet food manufacturers. "There are a couple of things to look for on pet food labels, including the complete and balanced nutrition notation and the nutritional adequacy statement," she explains.

The former attests that the product contains all required nutrients in the correct ratios, while the latter indicates what type of pet and what stage of life the product is suited for. Both statements are governed by the Association of American Feed Control Officials, which also has naming rules for dog food. If a product is labeled "beef dog food," for example, beef must constitute 95 percent of its ingredients, not counting added water. In a product that's labeled "dog dinner with beef," on the other hand, the "with" means beef can make up as little as 3 percent of the food's ingredients. Because ingredients must be listed in descending order according to their weight, the first ingredient in the ingredient list is most prevalent.

"The first ingredient, at least, should be a real, whole meat product," Bonk says. "The rest of the list should contain recognizable ingredients that all serve a purpose. Keep in mind that whole grains can be a nutritional part of a dog's diet — not all of them are fillers."

Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.

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