

Our Pets

How to make your dog's mealtime nutritious, fun

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Getting it right at meal time isn't always easy for busy dog owners.

There's a tendency to grab a bag of store-bought dog food, pour it in the bowl and be done with it.

"I've seen 18-year-old dogs that have been fed nothing but commercial food all their lives," said veterinarian Dani McVety.

Some of those store-bought brands do have a balanced mixture of nutrients that can serve a dog well, she said, but it's even more beneficial when people can add such supplements as fish oil or vegetables to their pet's diet.

"What we put into our own bodies is important, and the same is true for our dogs," McVety said.

Devoted owners can, on occasion, even take the time to cook their dogs a meal, much like they would for any family member.

Kris Rotonda does that sometimes. He has three dogs — Coco, Kobe and Jordan — that he gives home-cooked meals as a special treat.

"I started cooking for them because I think it's a healthier way to go for meals," Rotonda said.

For example, a favorite recipe — for chicken cakes — includes chicken, brown rice, peas, bread crumbs and parsley.

Rotonda's interest in his dogs' meal-time habits even inspired him to develop a creation he calls the PupPot (puppot.com), a cooking, serving and storage system for preparing homemade dog meals.

There's certainly something to be said for Rotonda's approach, and it goes beyond the nutritional aspects, McVety said.

"Cooking for our pets increases the bond we have with them and increases the time we spend with them," she added.

MAKE THE MOST OUT OF YOUR DOG'S MEAL

Mixing it up. Deciding whether to prepare a meal at home or opt for a commercial dog food instead doesn't have to be an either/or thing. McVety likes mixing things up with her own dog, with about half the daily calories coming from a balanced commercial dog food and the other half from ingredients she provides. Salmon is one of her favorite things to include in the meal rotation because of its anti-inflammatory properties, she said. She also likes to add eggs, along with vegetables such as carrots. "If it's healthy for us, generally it's going to be relatively good for them," she said.

Beware of allergies. Just like humans, dogs can be allergic to certain foods. In some cases, they develop allergies to the proteins in commercial dog foods. "That may or may not be because of the quality of the dog food they are getting," McVety said. "That's why I prefer organic." If you are adding something new to your dog's diet, introduce it slowly so you can monitor the dog's reaction.

Check with your vet. Ultimately, your dog may have specific diet needs based on its breed, health history or other factors. "It's important to work through a veterinarian because we understand the physiology of the animal," McVety said.

It's also a good way to know exactly what's in the animal's meal because you are adding each ingredient. Just what, and how much, to feed a pet varies, though. A certain amount of trial and error is involved as you

settle on the right amounts and the balance of nutrients, McVety said.

"But as long as it's a balanced diet that your vet recommended," she said, "then the benefits of cooking for your pet can be immeasurable."

