

Frozen Raw Diets

Feeding your dog a meat-based diet has never been easier.

BY RONA DISTENFELD

For a machine to work properly, it requires the manufacturer's recommended fuel, lubrication, and maintenance. The same is true for our dogs (and ourselves). In the wild, every creature will find and choose the foods most suitable for its evolutionary development. Our dogs evolved to eat – mostly – other animals. Their strong jaws were designed to crush bones, and their sharp teeth to tear raw meat. So say the innovators who developed so-called “BARF” diets for dogs. BARF is an acronym that stands for either Biologically Appropriate Raw Food, or Bones And Raw Food; the terms are used interchangeably.

There are thousands of dog guardians who feed their dogs homemade BARF-based diets, buying all the ingredients and preparing their dogs' meals from scratch. People who utilize home-prepared diets are happy to discuss the many benefits of this feeding method for their dogs, including clean, tartar-free teeth; fresh breath; strong bones, muscles, and joints; a glossy coat; a healthy amount of energy and a balanced temperament; and overall vibrant good health.

For all the people who have made the leap to a homemade, meat-based diet for their dogs, however, there are many more who would like to make the change, but who are intimidated by the challenge of “getting it just right.” Some are afraid of failing to present their dogs with a balanced array of nutrients; others fear bacterial contamination from handling raw meats.

It's all here

The advent of the commercially prepared, frozen meat-based diet is the answer to these people's prayers. Today, more than a dozen companies offer their versions of the BARF diet, so it's almost as easy as buying and feeding kibble. These products are a convenient, safe way to feed a raw-meat diet. Most of these diets are intended to be fed as a dog's “complete and balanced diet,” although a few manufacturers also market supplemental meats and meat-based foods.



Frozen foods that contain raw meat – and often, raw, ground bone – come in a variety of presentations and ingredients, and offer maximum convenience for raw feeders.

Some are available only in a local area, while others are available nationally. Some are quite comparable in price to food that you might buy and prepare yourself; others are more expensive, but generally make up for this in the high quality of the ingredients.

There are definite differences, however, so it's good to do a little footwork up front to find the company with the product (and pricing) that works best for you. We contacted 15 BARF manufacturers and discovered widely differing philosophies about everything from what should be in the mix to how the food should be shipped to your door.

The latter is actually an important point. While a few pet food and health food stores around the country are starting to carry these foods in freezers in their pet food sections, chances are you'll have to mail order your food. We found significant differences in the quality of the shipping packaging, which can make a difference if your food is likely to sit on the porch until someone gets home to put it in the freezer.

To ensure that your dog benefits from an improved diet, choose the products that

work most comfortably for your budget and your lifestyle.

Based on bones

The inclusion of fresh, raw bone in a BARF diet is supposed to be key to its resemblance to a dog's evolutionary diet – and to its benefits. But only some of the manufacturers whose products we examined include bone.

Some manufacturers utilize beef bone in their mixtures, but others found it too difficult to grind the bone fine enough or to find a reliable source of organic beef bones. These manufacturers use ground chicken bones instead. Some companies add calcium supplements to their products. A final group sells – and recommends that you feed – a separate bone or calcium supplement.

Don't forget the veggies

All the manufacturers see vegetables as an essential part of a dog's diet, although not all of them include them in their meat mixes.

Celeste Yarnall, owner of Celestial Pets, recommends that 40 percent of the dog's diet be carbohydrates from fiber-rich fruits

and vegetables, plus a small amount of grain such as slow-cooked oatmeal. The other 60 percent of the diet, she says, should be half low-fat, raw meat or poultry protein, and half bones and supplements.

Dr. Ian Billinghurst, one of the earliest proponents of the BARF diet and recent founder of BARFWorld, a new raw dog food company, recommends a different ratio: 60 percent raw, meaty bones; 15 percent crushed vegetables; 10 percent offal (organs and intestines); 5 percent fruit; and the remainder as supplements such as kefir and kelp.

Most of the manufacturers mix the veggies into their products. A few offer a choice of meat or meat and vegetable mixes. A third group sticks to straight meat mixes and suggests you add your own veggies. One company (Three Cheers Raw! Raw! Raw!) offers a "Raw Slaw" that is a vegetable mix you add to their meat mixes; it looked and smelled so good I wanted to try it myself! Its label also includes suggestions for adding your own fruits and veggies.

The other thing to look for is whether the vegetables are fresh or frozen before they're processed. You won't find this information on the label, so if it's important to you, go ahead and ask. Most use fresh and organic fruits and vegetables.

Grain isn't for every dog

Grain is a small part of the diet in the wild, finding its way into the mix when a wild carnivore eats grain-eating prey. Most of the BARF mixes we looked at were grain-free, but this varies by company and even by

Raw Information: Past and Future

Articles about diets based on raw meat, previously published in WDJ:

Feed Your Dog Back to Health, 9/01
Comparing Raw Diet Plans, 6/01
Raw-Fed Puppies, 12/00
Bones of Contention, 9/00
Practicing Safe Steaks, 8/00
Getting a Raw Deal, 9/99
The Meat of the Matter, 1/99

Planned articles about diets based on raw meat:

Commercial Food vs. Homemade: Pros & Cons of Each Approach
Homemade Diets: Raw vs. Cooked: What's Best for Your Dog?a

product. Check the ingredients to make sure your dog isn't getting something he can't tolerate (all the companies clearly list their ingredients).

Don't panic, it's organic

Most of the companies whose products we examined use human-grade meats. Some go one step further and use only hormone- and antibiotic-free meats. Organic vegetables and grains may be found in some of the products, too.

Holistic veterinarians agree that reducing the toxic burden that our dogs must carry through their lifetime contributes to better health and longevity. Because most dogs are exposed to a plethora of pesticides, herbicides, cleaning agents, and other chemicals in their short lifetimes, holistic practitioners argue that their food, at least, should be as pure as possible. We'd give bonus points to manufacturers who strive to include organic ingredients in their products.



The appearance, ingredients, and presentation of the frozen meat diets we examined varied quite a bit. However, all the products smelled good and were easy to portion and store.

Supplemental information

Some of the products we examined are guaranteed to be "complete and balanced," meaning a dog eating them would require no further supplements. But some of the companies sell meat-based mixes that are intended to be supplemented. And, of these companies, some make and sell the supplements themselves, and others advise and/or encourage owners to choose and add supplements themselves.

"We like to keep it simple," says Tim McCalleen of Grandad's Pet Foods. "We've been doing this for 30 years, and we think it works best when we provide the basics and encourage the dog owner to work with the veterinarian or breeder to determine what supplements to add based on the animal's health and activity."

The kibble question

The principals at two companies, Steve's Real Food for Dogs and Grandad's Pet Foods, believe it's all right to mix the BARF with kibble if that makes it more affordable. They reason that it's better for a dog to have at least part of his diet providing fresh, wholesome nutrients, even if the rest of the diet is less beneficial. Steve's Real Food is

even made to look like large kibble nuggets so it mixes easily with dry food. "Eighty-five percent of our customers mix our food with dry kibble," says Steve Brown, of Steve's Real Food. "We've found that even if just 25 percent to 50 percent of the calories come from our food, the dogs thrive."

Most of the other manufacturers we talked with felt it was okay to mix their products with the dog's usual kibble or canned food during the introductory phase to help

the dog's digestive system adapt, but the goal was to eliminate cooked, processed foods and replace them with a whole, raw food diet.

Dr. Ian Billinghurst makes a point in his latest book, *The BARF Diet*, that carbohydrates, a major constituent of most kibble foods, are not an essential, or even natural part of a dog's diet. He points to research that shows how a carbohydrate-based diet leads to a rise in blood glucose, which in turn causes a pathological rise in insulin. This leads to conditions such as diabetes, obesity, arthritis, and inflammatory illnesses. It may also play a role in promoting cancer, he says.

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The bottom line

Our observations about a dozen commercial raw, frozen diets are charted on the next two pages. We are aware of a couple more commercial diets, but their makers declined to participate in our survey.

If you want more information before you decide if BARF is something you want to try, do contact the manufacturers. A number of them have good research about their diets and all welcome the opportunity to share what they've learned through research and personal experience. Contact information is included in the table on the next page.

As with many natural health alternatives, it can take a while for the mainstream medical world to discover and embrace the benefits of something that isn't backed by large companies. WDJ has published many articles on the benefits of home-prepared diets, and will present more soon (see sidebar, "Raw Information, Past and Future").

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VENDOR INFO, PRICE	ARRIVED FROZEN	SHIPPING PACKAGE	PRODUCT PACKAGE	DIRECTIONS
Aunt Jeni's Home Made 4 Life Temple Hills, MD (301) 702-0123; auntjeni.com \$3 - \$4 per lb.; 10 lb. min. order	SEMI	Nicely packed with foam lining shipping box, reusable ice pack, and bubble wrap	White plastic tub, easy to open and close	Very good directions on defrosting, serving, and portion size
BARFWorld Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada (866) 282-BARF; barfworld.com \$14 - \$19 for 6 lb.-bag of patties. Must be ordered by the case or in multiples of 4 bags	YES	Solid Styrofoam container with reusable ice packs	White plastic bags sealed with twist ties. Easy to open and close. Patties are easy to separate and store in smaller quantities	Gives clear feeding guidelines by weight of dog with special notes for puppies
Celeste Yamall Foods Westlake Village, CA (888) CEL-PETS; celestialpets.com ground meats: \$2.60 - \$3 per lb. mixed loaves: \$3.75 per lb.	YES	Thick, solid Styrofoam container. No ice, but very well insulated. Delivered overnight	Clear plastic shrink-wrap packs. Easy to stack in freezer. Food is clearly visible	Good instructions for defrosting, feeding, and suggested feeding quantities
FarMore from Fargo Aldergrove, British Columbia, Canada (604) 607-7475; fargoresearch.com \$10 - \$12 per 5-lb. box	YES	Insulated material with dry ice pack	Printed cardboard box holds five individual 1-lb. plastic tubes	Very general thawing directions and suggested feeding quantities on box
Grandad's Pet Foods Santa Clara, CA (800) 644-5667; grandadspetfoods.com \$1 - \$1.50 per lb. for meat products, \$ 1.50 - \$2 per lb. for meat/vegetable mixes	YES	Styrofoam cooler with dry ice	Colorful plastic tube bags with tape-sealed tops. Easy to handle and not too large to store easily	Enclosed flyer explains how to portion, thaw, store, and serve food. No guidelines as to recommended portion size
Halshan Premium Raw Food Harbor City, CA (888) 766 -9725; halshan.com \$2.65 - \$6.30 per lb.	YES	Neat, easy to open. Lots of paper but freezer box is recyclable	Meat/bone products in clear plastic. Meat/veggie mixes in white butcher paper lined with thin plastic film	None
Nature's Menu Lake Geneva, WI (262) 495-8080; freshpetfood.com \$3 - \$3.65 per lb. Discounts for 30-lb. orders	NO	Food was defrosted but still cold. No ice or freezer bags were in the interior Styrofoam box	Ziplock bags. They leaked blood and goo since the food was defrosted when it arrived	Provides directions on how to introduce raw food, feed the diet, and suggested serving sizes
Pat McKay, Inc. Pasadena, CA (800) 975-7555; patmckay.com Food sold in 6-oz. to 5-lb. packages, depending on contents. Prices range from \$1.90 - \$6.50	YES	Very well packaged and insulated	Clear plastic containers inside clear plastic bags. Containers stack easily in freezer and are simple to open and close	None provided
Purely Primitives from Teddy's Freezer (Wolfstar Corp), Seattle, WA (888) 500-9589; teddysfreezer.com Prices are set by distributors and may vary by region. Prices start at \$4.75 per lb. and fluctuate with costs of ingredients	YES	Insulated bag inside box with an ice pack	Sausage-like clear plastic tubes. Easy to see contents, but not easy to open and reseal	Product literature gives good directions on portioning, thawing, and how much to feed
Steve's Real Food for Dogs Eugene, OR (888) 526-1900; stevesrealfood.com \$6.29 - \$8 per 2.5-lb. package. Prices vary by region as well as by type of meat	YES	Lots of tape and Styrofoam peanuts. Intact and frozen	Clear plastic bags with plastic fasteners (like on bread bags). Easy to open and close	Package and enclosed flyer suggest feeding straight or mixing with kibble. Suggested feeding amounts were included
Three Cheers Raw! Raw! Raw! Columbiana, OH (800) 354-4216; boxframe.com/paws \$2.50 per lb. with increasing discounts for multi-pound orders	YES	Thick, solid Styrofoam container. No ice, but well insulated	White plastic tubs (like deli coleslaw containers). Stack well, open and close easily	Package included basic information on BARF and company products. No real "how to use" information, however

FIRST 10 INGREDIENTS

IF FOLLOWED BY . . . THERE ARE MORE INGREDIENTS. IF FOLLOWED BY A PERIOD, THE LIST OF INGREDIENTS IS COMPLETE

COMMENTS

Chicken variety: organic chicken (muscle meat, heart, and liver); finely ground raw chicken bones; pureed carrots, broccoli, cabbage, sweet potatoes, and apples; powdered organic alfalfa; powdered organic kelp; farm-fresh whole eggs (including shells) . . .

Four varieties for dogs: lamb, chicken, beef, rabbit. "Aunt Jeni" has a Masters degree in animal science nutrition. Product is "complete and balanced." Uses organic meats and organic produce when possible. Made in company's own facility. Provides phone support for health and nutrition questions

BARF Chicken variety: Chicken, finely ground chicken bones, beef liver, whole egg, cultured kefir, broccoli, celery, spinach, carrot, ground flax seed . . .

It's true: Dr. Ian Billinghurst – Australian veterinarian, book author, and one of the earliest proponents of BARF – now makes and sells BARF diets. Chicken, beef, lamb, pork, and kangaroo varieties are available, as well as combination-meat varieties. BARFWorld offers unconditional money-back guarantees and lots of literature and phone support

Celestial Loaves, Chicken variety: Chicken thigh meat (boneless & skinless), ground chicken, chicken hearts, chicken liver, chicken skin, carrots, sweet potatoes, kale, spinach, chard . . .

Celestial Pets offers a wide range of meat, organ, meat/organ, and meat/organ/vegetable mixes, in loaves and patties. Owner recommends adding the supplements she sells whether you use her frozen meat loaves or make your own (she provides recipes)

Beef, carrots, organ meat (beef heart, kidney, liver), cooked barley, oats, oat hulls, purified water (as necessary for processing), fresh ground flax, molasses, apple cider vinegar, cooked eggs . . .

Meat was ground fine and easily squeezed out of tube bag once defrosted. This product is made in Canada in government inspected facilities. Human grade meats and organ meats used

Chicken & Vegetable Blend: ground chicken necks, backs, and breast bones; sweet potatoes, broccoli, kale, carrots, zucchini.

Uses organic and free-range beef and chicken but strives to keep prices low. Offers meat/organ/bone mixes with and without vegetables. Does not add supplements because they believe these should be specific to the dog's needs based on health and activity. In business 30 years. Uses only ground chicken bones, no beef bones

Turkey with Vegetables variety: White and dark turkey meat, carrots, cauliflower, spinach, parsley (does not contain bone). Company recommends organ meat mix be fed separately 2-3 times per week. Also, if bones are not fed, company suggests adding either its "Meat Balancer" or calcium supplement

Many different meat, meat/vegetable, and organ mixes sold. Company explains that people who order their food are knowledgeable about BARF, which is why they are willing to pay a little more for quality. Company refers newcomers to recognized literature for more information

Products are 80% muscle meat, 20% organ meat. Not a complete diet. Products do not include ground bone; instead they sell whole, organic beef bones. Company suggests the addition of Nature's Menu Forage Formula, which contains vegetables, herbs, dried meats, seeds, nuts, fruits, sea vegetation, vitamins, minerals, trace elements, and live enzymes, which may be combined with meat diets or served alone

Most of product line is range-grazed or organic meat and chicken; company also offers less expensive, lower grade meats. Product literature also contains information about switching dogs to BARF diet, and explaining possible short-term effects the dog may experience when the diet is first introduced

"Purple Label" meals are 75% meat, poultry, or fish, and 25% vegetables (carrots, sweet potatoes, cabbage, squash, celery, broccoli, cauliflower, turnips, jicama, chard, kale, parsley); these come in eight varieties: Beef, Beef Heart, Chicken, Chicken Liver, Lamb, Lamb Kidney, Turkey, and Fish. "Red Label" products do not include vegetables and come in four varieties: Beef, Chicken, Lamb, and Turkey.

All naturally grown and frozen fresh under USDA and FDA restrictions for foods for human consumption. Comes in varieties of boneless meats with and without vegetables. Strongly recommends you add their supplements to make a complete and balanced meal

"Complete Chicken Teddypack" contains ground chicken drumsticks, boneless chicken, chicken liver, crushed certified organically grown celery, winter squash (pumpkin, acorn, red kuri, butternut), yellow sweet potatoes, Swiss chard, kale, spinach, dandelion greens . . .

Company uses only grass-fed range lamb and venison, free-range poultry fed vegetarian diets, and free-range rabbit. All is hormone-, antibiotic-, and stimulant-free. All vegetables are certified organic. Company sells many meat, meat/organ, meat/organ/vegetable mixes. Also sells turkey and chicken necks separately

Chicken variety contains ground chicken (including backs), broccoli, romaine lettuce, carrots, cantaloupe, chicken livers, chicken gizzards, rice bran, flax seed, egg shell powder . . .

Bite-sized chunks are easy to pour and measure whether frozen or defrosted. Very juicy once defrosted. Available in chicken, turkey, or beef varieties. These are "complete and balanced" foods, which can be fed alone. Company suggests mixing with kibble to make feeding BARF more affordable. Also makes a freeze-dried product

Chicken & Vegetable Mix: Whole chicken pieces (including bones), carrot, zucchini, romaine, celery, apples, cabbage, chicken giblets, flax seed, kelp, garlic.

Ratio of chicken meat to veg approx 2:1, ratio of chicken meat to chicken bone approx 5:1. Products ground and frozen weekly to fill orders; dated and shipped so they are never more than 10 days old upon arrival and can be safely kept in the freezer for 6 months. Also offers green tripe, and "raw slaw" veggie mix for dogs to add to their meat/organ mixes. Staff is available for phone consults on raw feeding