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Rawhide chews should have an aroma but not be odour free which indicates over-processing and bleaching nor should they be malodorous which would most likely be due to bacterial infestation or rancidity. Also check packaging or tap the rawhide chew against a counter to see if there are any pests resident which can happen by cross-infestation from older stock or bad storage.

And the final tip is try to use products that are made from a single piece of hide, not smaller bits that are knotted and can come apart easily. Rolls can be viewed from the side to see if they are one piece or multiple shards. The bigger the bone, the longer it takes to chew and devour but it should be taken away when it becomes too small and pose a choking hazard.

Julie Crooks of Health-Mutt adds, "Many owners fear choking, and this can be a real threat to dogs that will gulp down anything. Always supervise your pet when introducing a new type of chew treat. Understand your pet's chewing habits before leaving them unsupervised. As a rule of thumb bigger the better—it's awfully hard to swallow something as long as your head is wide."

When it comes to pig ears, sometimes what you are buying is not the ear at all—it's simply cheaper fatty hide that has been cut, pressed and dried into a triangular shape of what resembles an ear.

The dehydration process locks in the flavour and nutrients as opposed to drying and smoking which can change the flavour and also damage some of the nutrients."



Sharyn Hall from Dog-e-Treats explains, "Imported pigs' ears are huge and very cheap, but are often deep-fried (think trans-fats) & always irradiated. Fatty foods like ham & pork crackling or deep-fried anything can cause pancreatitis, which is painful, often fatal and will definitely cost you more in vet fees than the \$2 treat!"

"My choice of treat is Australian with no additives; it must be dehydrated or dried at low temperatures to result in a highly nutritious, concentrated product...it takes up to 10 kg of raw to make one kg of dried so you will pay more but you can give less!"

Most meat pet treats have been traditionally hot air dried or smoked/cooked. These processes can diminish the nutritional values, enzymes, flavours and change the overall look of the finished product. Proteins are especially vulnerable to heat and become damaged, or 'denatured,' when cooked. Altered proteins may contribute to food intolerance, food allergies and inflammatory bowel disease. The newest and most nutrition retaining is dehydration.

David Coleman of Natural Pet Treats explains why dehydration is preferable over hot air drying. "Certain products can and will dry harder than other products, but the issue is if enough moisture has been removed to avoid any occurrence of moulds and bacteria in the products, because the issue is healthy treats not hard or soft."

"As far as bones are concerned, it is general knowledge that a cooked bone will always be brittle and break in shards so any form of moisture extraction that does not involve cooking (i.e. dehydration) will always create a safer product for the pets. The obvious argument being for how long and at what temperatures before it is classified as cooked!"

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Roslyn Lim, who operates Vital Supasnax adds, "In terms of dried pet treats, it is a form of treat that is very high in protein, low in fat and in its truest flavoursome form. It goes through a natural wash for cleaning and sterilising after preparation, then dried in temperature controlled rooms, with drying times varying based on the product. It is 100% natural. Bone products that are dried this way, do not produce splinters that could harm the dog, vs. cooked bones which are not recommended for dogs."

"The naturally dried treat ends up being hard, packed full of flavour, giving the dog exercise for its teeth and gums, keeping it amused, and eating a product where it will not gain weight unnecessarily." Roslyn analyses. That is as long as you don't 'treat load' your dog, overfeed it on high calorie treats or overuse treats as a pooch pacifier. Treats should constitute far less than 10% of a pet's daily food intake.

Roslyn advises, "Some customers' pets have allergies, so they find that the naturally dried treats are all they can eat, because a lot of the products out there are highly processed or chemicals added, but in saying that, because products do break down to the natural product, should they swallow a piece too large, vs. the rawhide, the dog is in no danger, their stomach can easily digest and pass quickly."

As Sharyn Hall outlines, "You have to know your dog and feed them the right size and type for their size and age as well as health problems. We need to 'know our dog'—my Floyd is a patient chewer so I am happy for him to have his post-breakfast Greenie but I would never give hard treats to a gobbler like Roxy who swallows everything whole! Heidi's a Schnauzer (a breed prone to pancreatitis) so we always give her lean roo treats like dried tendons or fish that is naturally high in good omega 3 oils. Zanda's itchy rashes need low-allergy/high omega 3 roo treats, and Sophie's sensitive tummy likes lean lamb puffs. If your dog has special needs or problems ask your treat supplier for advice on what will suit." And we at Urban Animal would urge you to consult with your vet too.



A trusted Marketing Manager of a major distributor (which does not sell rawhide treats) preferred to remain anonymous but had done his research. "Recently I have been researching the different methods of creating meat treats and found dehydrated treats stacked up very well compared to other methods such as drying and smoking. The dehydration process locks in the flavour and nutrients as opposed to drying and smoking which can change the flavour and also damage some of the nutrients."

"Dehydration actually enhances the aroma and flavour. For instance 1kg of raw fish or meat becomes 300g of dehydrated product, but contains all the flavour and aroma of 1kg. As dogs evaluate their food based largely upon the aroma, dehydrated treats appear to be very popular with dogs in some recent sampling we did with dogs owned by staff in here (not a particularly scientific method I admit!)."

"Of the dehydrated treats I looked at, Spear Fish and Hoki Biscuits were high in Omega 3 & 6 Essential Fatty Acids, and the roo products were extremely low in fat, at only 2.4%. Lamb products were said to be light on the stomach, making them great for dogs with sensitive stomachs."

His company also sells an odd product that we have been delighted with after discovering it through its importer, VCA. It's a pressed product that bizarrely resembles a pig ear but contains no meat. We jokingly call it Kosher, Halal and Vegan so it's safe for the dogs of our Jewish and Muslim brethren as well as our radical vegetarian friends.

"In regards to the Vegetarian Ears, the benefits of this product are that they also contain only 2.4% fat, whereas a Pigs Ear would be significantly higher. They are made from wheat starch, vegetable fibre and lecithin, with only natural flavours and colours, so while they aren't as flavoursome as a pigs ear, I'm sure they would be healthier, and less risky."

In the end, the pet parent has a world of choice but has to take into account the freshness, source, storage, size and type of treat that is going to be best for their pet. We hope this article has helped and if in doubt, get qualified advice from your vet or other qualified pet professional.



Trick or Treat

A Vets tips to keep you from the emergency room

1. Work out the reason you are giving the treat. Is it for dental care, training purposes, or to keep the pet busy for a period of time?
2. A one-size fits all does not apply to treats. Some treats are more suitable to certain breeds and dispositions. For example, a Staffy with powerful jaws would do well with a large hard bone whereas a toy-breed may be able to carry this around but not chew it or get any nutritional benefit from it. Sometimes 'Trial but not Error' works best. If in doubt, supervision is key as a small breed may be more prone to be blocked by fragments 'jamming up' at the back of the mouth—like the soggy remnants of a pigs ear.
3. Be aware that treats can cause friction and even fights in a multiple animal household. Resource guarding can be a problem in multi-pet homes. If there've been incidents or you're unsure whether a fracas could break out, separate pets when giving chew treats.
4. Treats for dental purposes could be pointless or even dangerous due to choking in an animal that doesn't chew and is a gulper. Many vets recommend raw chicken wings but only if the dog chews them and you supervise consumption.
5. It is wise to have your pet's mouth professionally examined before starting treats. For example treats could be detrimental in animals with loose, infected teeth or an 'overcrowded mouth'. This is especially important if you've adopted a dog and are uncertain of their medical history.
6. It is best to be aware that there is a wide range of fat content in various treats—read the labels carefully. You may be adding to your pet's weight problem and therefore you should feed less of the animal's regular food when treats are added. The fat content is even more critical in certain disease situations eg diabetes, pancreatitis, inflammatory bowel disease etc. Often non-packaged treats like pig's ears, carry no nutritional breakdown or feeding guidelines, so fat content can be hard to guess.
7. Most people know NEVER give cooked bones but it is amazing how often we see constipation, or bowel blockages in dogs that have ingested cooked bones. At my practice, we recently operated on a Labrador which had got at cooked bones which fully blocked and perforated his bowel. Remember with their advanced sense of smell they find bins, bones at BBQs and discarded bones at parks.
8. A good rule of thumb is WATCH your dog carefully the first time you give a certain treat - is he chewing, are sharp bits breaking off, does some of it seem to get caught between his teeth. If he/she is clawing at the face, salivating, having breathing or swallowing troubles, seek immediate veterinary attention if this happens.
9. Genuine rawhide type products are usually good for dogs with a full head of teeth because this mimics 'the wild' where dogs eat the whole carcass. The problem is knowing the source and therefore quality of these products.
10. Watch for signs after giving treats of any gastric upset. On numerous occasions I have been investigating causes of vomiting, loose faeces, gut pain etc. I usually get the clients to discuss the animal's diet with me but they omit to mention the treats because they don't consider them food. ANYTHING that is swallowed or even goes into your animal's mouth may be significant.

Dr Michael Kidd B.V.Sc from Hurlstone Park Veterinary Clinic is our guest vet commentator on the safety of treats.

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