

Feeding Bones

Darren Hawks, DVM

Many of you already feed raw bones and know the benefits. But others have many questions about whether or not to feed bones to their dog. There are many good reasons to consider feeding bones, but you must do so with some caution.

Benefits of feeding bones

Bones provide mechanical abrasion to remove plaque and tartar from teeth. They help keep gums healthy. Ingestion of bones can provide valuable minerals. One of the best benefits of providing bones is supplying an opportunity for exercise and an outlet for normal chewing behavior.

Potential problems

There are several potential risks associated with chewing bones. Teeth, especially the large molars in the back of the mouth, can break, requiring expensive extraction of the tooth. A portion of a bone can be swallowed. If the piece is too large, it can block the intestines and require surgery. If the fragment is sharp, it might puncture the intestines. Blockage of the airways, or choking, is possible. If an excessive amount of bone is ingested, the colon can become impacted with bone chips, resulting in pain and at times the need for general anesthesia. Some types of bones (not raw) are processed with chemicals. Bones in the shape of a ring with a hollow center can become lodged around the lower jaw. Feeding of bones does require supervision to ensure safety.

Options

*Safe bones- There is always some risk with feeding bones. If you are not willing to accept a small amount of risk, then try a Nylabone. All bones must be of an appropriate size- either small enough to swallow without a problem (such as chicken or turkey necks or backs) or so large that only very small pieces can be chewed off (these bones must be taken away once they reach a small enough size to swallow). All bones should be raw. Cooked bones are too brittle and can cause perforation of the esophagus or intestines. The chewing of bones should be directly supervised in case of choking, the bone being broken down into too small of a piece, or the ingestion of too much bone at one time. Bacteria might be expected on raw bones; bones must be handled by humans with typical

caution, and contamination of surfaces is possible. ZiwiPeak distributes a deer shank bone with marrow which has been dried in such a way as to avoid this bacterial risk.

*Antlers- Antlers have the advantage of not having bacteria. They are too large to swallow, but must be supervised and removed once chewed into smaller pieces. Antlers have an advantage over some chew products in that they do not have chemicals. ZiwiPeak distributes a great antler product.

*Dental treats- There are many types of dental chew treats available. Many of these have potential problems. Many of the dental chew treats are not fully digestible, a problem which can result in blockage of the intestines. Most chew treats contain unnatural additives such as propylene glycol, preservatives, and dyes. Green type products often owe their green color to dyes, not just chlorophyll. Ingredient lists often contain items that are best avoided, such as soy. Chew treats are often given daily, so any bad ingredients really add up and count! In addition, avoid products imported from China. In the end, you really have to read the ingredient list. Mercola.com makes a good, healthy dental chew treat.

*Nylabones- Nylabones are the safest option for chewing, as long as they are taken away before they become small enough to swallow. They do satisfy chewing behavior, although some dogs do not show interest in Nylabones. I also have marked reservations about the ingestion of the plastic over time.