


# what's for dinner?

If you're considering cooking your pet's food from scratch, here's what you need to know. **BY STEPHANIE EMMA PFEFFER**

 Making healthy, delicious meals for people can already be a challenge, but an increasing number of pet owners are cooking for their animals, too. About 17 percent of dogs and 6 percent of cats get home-cooked meals, either in lieu of or in addition to commercially prepared pet food.

## What's the draw?

Primarily, it's concern for the pet's health. Sean Delaney, DVM, MS, DACVN, founded [balanceit.com](http://balanceit.com) in 2005 to provide complete and balanced recipes, formulation software, and products for those who want to home-cook pet meals. He notes that most early users of his site had sick animals and were coping with conditions like allergies or palatability issues.

Interest in the concept rose further after the melamine pet food recall of 2007. Today, as people's preference for high-quality, organic, and minimally processed ingredients trickles down to their pets, the trend continues to grow.

But unfortunately, as well-intentioned as these pet owners are, many of their meal plans don't measure up.

"Almost none of the home-cooked diets that people feed their animals meet the nutritional standards required by law of commercial foods," says Cailin R. Heinze, VMD, MS, DACVN, assistant professor of nutrition at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine.

## What are the challenges?

A common mistake owners make is thinking that the food they cook for themselves will also be adequate for their pets. Animals have different nutritional requirements from humans: cats, for example, need taurine—an amino acid derivative their bodies can't synthesize—for heart health. And creating complete, balanced home-prepared meals demands a detailed, scientifically grounded approach. A recipe Heinze develops for dogs might include chicken breast, sweet potato, and peas, but also different amounts of corn oil and fish oil, and a supplement made to balance home-cooked foods.

Home cooking for your pet can also require

a serious investment of money, work, and time. "People think a home-made diet is going to be cheaper, but dry food or kibble is the least expensive option," Delaney says. One of Heinze's clients spends \$10 to \$12 a day to feed salmon and quinoa to a 60-pound dog. In addition to cost, convenience is a consideration, Delaney adds. "It's always going to be easier to open up a can or bag."

## What's the best approach?

If you're committed to cooking for your pet, it doesn't have to be hard. Start by talking to your veterinarian about your animal's health and specific needs. Then look for recipes created by a vet who has undergone specialty training in nutrition, Heinze advises, citing a study that found that only 9 out of 200 homemade recipes from various print and online sources met nutritional standards—and 8 of the 9 were written by veterinary nutritionists.

And remember, most pets can do fine without home cooking. "There are lots of different ways to feed a dog or a cat," Heinze says. "If you meet energy and

essential nutrient needs, it doesn't matter if that diet is home-cooked meals, commercial food, or a mixture of the two." In fact, for healthy pets, she suggests serving primarily high-quality commercial pet food and supplementing with human food. The key is

to keep "extras" to less than 10 percent of your animal's daily calories and make sure they're nutritious. "There's no reason why you and your dog can't sit together watching TV, eating air-popped popcorn," Heinze says.

"Don't tell me it was my night to cook!"



## HOW HEALTHY IS IT?

Delaney's checklist for evaluating a recipe. Does it have:

- **ANIMAL PROTEIN?** It's essential for cats. For vegetarian dogs, there must be a high level of lentils or tofu.
- **A CONCENTRATED SOURCE OF CALCIUM** like ground bone or a supplement made to fortify homemade food?
- **A FATTY ACID** like a vegetable oil for linoleic acid?
- **ELECTROLYTE MINERALS** like salt and potassium chloride?
- **TAURINE?** This is a must for cats.
- **A VITAMIN SOURCE** formulated for homemade diets?