

Owners more aware of pet nutrition

by Ranny Green
Times pet editor

Americans' attitudes toward pet foods are changing. Recognizing the filler content and color additives, growing numbers are turning to health products at specialty stores instead of the old stand-by lines overflowing grocery-store shelves.

Numerous books, veterinary symposiums and increased advertising by health-food manufacturers have created a public awareness about the need for improved pet nutrition.

The publication with the most impact has been "Pet Allergies: Remedies for an Epidemic," by Dr. Alfred Plechner and Martin Zucker, published in 1986 by Very Healthy Enterprises.

Plechner attacks the food giants with a vengeance. "More than 30 percent of the ailments I treat in my practice are directly related to food," he says.

He dissects the giant dry, canned and semi-moist pet-food market, citing how each form of diet becomes the trigger mechanism for an assortment of problems ranging from skin allergies to chronic liver disease, pancreatitis and kidney and bladder ailments in dogs and cats.

Many of us live in households where these species are bosom buddies. But what happens when one ingests food of the other?

Usually that occurs without the owners' knowledge. Small amounts won't produce a serious illness, according to several area



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veterinarians interested in pet-nutrition.

Recently, I took our robust 7-year-old golden retriever Sunny to the veterinarian. This healthy animal was suddenly having digestive trouble.

On the examination table, Sunny's anatomy was meticulously probed by Dr. Bill Baldwin of Federal Way, who was checking for any signs of acute pain. Sunny did not react with any show of distress.

Then, Baldwin quizzed me, asking if the dog had eaten anything unusual in the last few days. Being a retriever, she loves to fetch sticks and tennis balls, but we're very careful about sticks, fearing she might swallow a sliver capable of puncturing an organ.

He asked about an assortment of other possibilities, none of which were likely. Then he added, "Any chance the dog might have got into some cat food?"

Bingo!

Sunny has been known to occasionally raid a dish full of cat food when no one was home, and was suspected of doing so a day or two earlier. It doesn't take a great detective to ascertain she's raided the dish. Unlike the cat, she licks it clean. And when asked, "Did you eat the cat's food?" she instantly bows her head and heads for the closest out-of-the-way spot.

Baldwin was convinced cat food was the culprit. "It takes 24 hours or a bit more for something like that to work its way through a dog's digestive tract," he said. "At that point, it might show some minor adverse symptoms."

Medication and shutting off her access to cat food have combined to clear up Sunny's condition.

Dr. Verle Call of Sno-King Animal Clinic in Lynnwood and a Northwest representative of Wy-song Diets, a natural-food line, said, "If the dog or cat ate the other's food on a long-term basis, you'd see some side effects."

"The affect of the food on the other species depends on a lot of things — stress, general health condition and the contents of the food itself."

It's possible that one dog in the same household might not be bothered by an occasional dip into the cat's dish, while a canine housemate could experience gastrointestinal problems.

Dr. Jeff Thoren of Gig Harbor, state service representative for Hill's Pet Products, adds, "Protein and fat content in dog and cat diets vary considerably."

"For instance, the protein in Hill's Prescription Diet Feline c/d

is 35 percent in dry and 44 percent in canned, contrasted to Canine c/d, which is 22 percent in dry and 23 percent in canned.

"The fat levels for Feline c/d are 26 percent in dry and 30 percent in canned while the Canine c/d is 21 percent in dry and 24 percent for canned."

Cats require twice as much protein as dogs. The National Research Council claims cats should receive 30 percent of their diet in the form of protein.

Plechner asks, "But if only half — in the best of grocery-store products — of protein in a commercial diet is absorbed and utilized, what about the rest? What about the junk? What kind of problems is it causing?"

"Does your dog or cat burp a lot? Expel gas? Have a rumbling tummy? Loose stool? These are signs of an irritated intestine. The food is entering the gut and the organs of digestion are finding it too coarse, too unnatural, too incompatible. High-protein kibble is often the reason for this."

The lesson: If your dog or cat is tempted to eat from the other's full bowl, remove the bowl or close off the area before leaving the premises. It might save you a veterinary call and your pet some short-term gastrointestinal discomfort.

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