

# A netnography study of consumer food safety perceptions and practices relating to raw meat pet diets.

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## Introduction

With rapid increase in the popularity of raw meat based diets for pets, multiple concerns have been raised with regards to the potential health risks to the pet owners, who choose to feed such diet, and the likelihood of transmission of pathogenic bacteria to humans within the household. After the debate by British Veterinary Nursing Association, it has been universally agreed by the raw-feeding advocates, as well as by those who represented the anti-raw viewpoint, that, due to the handling of raw meat products, raw meat feeding poses higher risk to the pet owners (Waters, 2017). However, pet owners' attitudes, the perception of risk and food safety knowledge often shape the implementation of food safety practices within their household.

## Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the pet owners' food safety perceptions and practices within their own kitchen, when feeding raw meat based diets to their pets.

## Results

Raw feeding forum participants have posted various responses, some of which have even had an undertone of humour and sarcasm, when food safety practices were discussed (Figures 3 and 6).

- It has been observed that the mistrust in manufacturing industry and the need to know and control the content of their pets' food are the main drivers for choosing to feed raw meat diet.
- Pet owners have indicated awareness of correct food safety practices and hygiene, however they did not always implement food safety recommendations.
- In general pet owners attitudes have been based on the beliefs that the raw meat diet is natural and that cats/dogs are "designed" to eat raw meat (Figure 1).
- Pet owners express worry and fear when it comes to their pets' safety or safety of their children, but not their own safety (Figure 9). Reviewed comments indicated that pet owners' perception of risk of foodborne illness, when feeding raw meat, varied (Figures 2 and 5), although many were aware of presence of pathogens in raw meat (Figure 1).
- Moreover, majority of forum participants do not trust the vets' opinion, hence the vet's advice is often not being followed by the owners of raw fed pets, even when the vets have warned them of potential food safety hazards (Figure 7).
- The most cautious people were the ones that have previously experienced a bacterial infection and immunocompromised people (Figure 8).
- When discussing food safety and hygiene in their kitchen ( $n=115$ ), a small amount of people would describe pet food preparation practices in detail ( $n=24$ ). Majority of pet owners, who described their food safety practices, have stated that when preparing raw meat pet meals they are 'using the same hygiene as you would when handling any raw meat'. Two pet owners have reported an incorrect food safety practice of rinsing raw meat (Figure 10).
- Forum participants were also observed to encourage others to use correct food safety practices by giving general advice (Figure 4). However, the advice was rarely containing a link to a reliable source of information.

**Lack of time and correct knowledge, false sense of security, optimistic bias and illusion of control, due to previous experience, have been often shown to serve as reasons for neglecting correct food safety and hygiene practices in households where pets are fed raw meat diet.**

## Significance

- The completion of this netnography study has determined that pet owners, who feed raw meat diets, indicate awareness of food safety, but fail to report implementation of food safety recommendations. It is vital to raise the pet owners' awareness of the health risks associated with raw meat diets.
- There is, undoubtedly, a need for more research and clear unified consumer instructions, in order to inform pet owners of the appropriate food safety practices, with regards to raw meat pet feeding, and in order to avoid foodborne illness.

## Methods

This study has been performed using netnography approach. The forum posts ( $n=809$ ) relating to raw meat pet feeding have been chosen from the archival data of Petforums social media platform. And, after a review, forum threads ( $n=26$ ), consisting only of posts that are relevant to food safety, have been selected ( $n=308$ ). All collected posts have been coded and analysed for common emerging themes.

## Forum Posts

"Most raw meat probably does have salmonella bacteria on it. A little bit of salmonella on raw meat is not going to bother a healthy cat."

Figure 1. Response relating to pathogen awareness.

"A balanced raw diet is no more dangerous than a commercial one and no more dangerous to the humans feeding it than preparing your own meat or salad."

Figure 2. Response relating to risk perception.

"Never had a complaint from a dog about a dirty bowl."

Figure 3. Humorous response relating to discussing the frequency of washing pet bowls

"It's a good idea to instill hygiene rules into children, and all members of the household and follow them."

Figure 4. Response containing correct food safety advice

"Maybe my house is filled with germs but we all have cast iron stomachs and nobody seems to get sick so if it aint broke I shant fix it!"

Figure 5. Response reflecting dismissive attitude to food safety practices and an optimistic bias.

"If a raw diet is so dangerous and if half of Netherland pet owners are feeding it, how come the hospitals aren't full to overflowing with dead and dying pet owners?!!"

Figure 6. Response containing sarcastic attitude to food safety warnings relating to raw meat feeding.

"why borrow trouble dwelling on 'what ifs'?"

Figure 7. Response to food safety warnings relating to raw meat feeding reflecting optimistic bias.

"I have a compromised immune system so it's important for me to avoid such risks."

Figure 8. Response relating to risk perception

"The thought of eating contaminated food then licking a child is a worrying thought."

Figure 9. Emotional response reflecting the risk perception when discussing raw meat feeding.

## Food safety practices reported by pet owners



Figure 10. Food safety practices reported by pet owners that feed raw meat diets ( $n=24$ ), where blue column indicates an incorrect food safety practice.

## References

- PetForums Community (2019). Available at: [www.petforums.co.uk](http://www.petforums.co.uk) (Accessed: 14 October 2019).  
Waters, A. (2017). Raw diets: are we at a turning point? *Veterinary Record*, 181, 384.2-384.