Exploring the perceptions and practices of pet-owners regarding and provision of food safety information regarding raw meat-based pet diets.

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Introduction

In the UK, raw meat-based diets for pets is an increasing consumer trend. A number of studies have determined the prevalence of pet-owners in commercial raw meat-based diets (Chengappa, et al., 1993; Hamer, et al., 2014; Boele, et al., 2017; van Breukelen, et al., 2017-10). It can be argued that handling and preparation of raw meat-based food may carry a health risk to pet-owners, especially if performed improperly. This was highlighted by the British Veterinary Nursing Association (2017). However, there is currently a lack of data detailing the food safety perceptions and practices of pet-owners who provide raw meat-based diets to pets. Furthermore, pet-owners may utilise social media to obtain information regarding raw meat-based diets, therefore, it is essential to explore the provision of food safety information available relating to the consumer trend.

Purpose

To explore pet-owners’ perceptions and self-reported food-safety practices, related to raw meat-based diets, and to explore online provision of food-safety information, regarding raw meat-based pet feeding.

Methods

In order to achieve the aims, this research project incorporated three phases of data collection:

1. A serendipity study, using a content analysis approach was used to analyse archive posts from Pet Forums Community (the likes most popular pet owner social media site), relating to ‘raw fed’ and ‘raw fed’ food safety (n=410).
2. An online questionnaire, regarding food safety perceptions and practices was completed by pet owners reporting to provide raw meat-based diets for pets (n=274).
3. Manufacturers/supplier websites (n=13) were reviewed for provision of food safety guidelines for pet-owners on raw meat-based diets for pets.

Results

Netnography study of pet-owners perceptions

The review of the forum posts (n=430) revealed that most commonly expressed concerns regarding raw meat-based food was ‘natural’ for pets and was perceived to be ‘safer’ and ‘better’ than manufactured pet food (see comments 21 and 110). The risk of illness was perceived to be associated with direct contact between pets and humans and a lack of hygiene (Comment 111); many did not perceive risks associated with raw pet food (Comment 86). Those that expressed concern regarding raw pet food in forum posts did so in relation to their pets or their children, but not their own safety (Comment 12). Whereas pet-owners with comprehensive immunity, or those who had previously experienced foodborne illness were most aware of potential risks (Comment 33).

Pet-owners mentioned various pathogens that may be associated with raw pet food. However, forum members indicated potential confusion regarding how to minimize the risks (Comment 83). Although some forum members indicated appropriate food safety precautions were taken (Comment 10 and 72), others indicated a sense of optimism regarding pathogens (Comment 88), and in some cases forum members shared potential misperceptions that may cause cross-contamination (Comment 7).

Self-reported food safety practices of pet-owners

While respondents reported knowledge of pathogens that may be present in raw meat-based diets, and reported awareness of food safety practices; many did not report implementing appropriate food safety practices consistently. Furthermore, food safety mishaps, such as rinsing raw meat (72%) and lack of segregation (52%) were also reported. Almost all pet-owners (98%) were confident in their ability to prepare raw pet food; raw meat-based diets do not pose potential risk to themselves or their family members, the vast majority (98%) had full confidence in their cleaning and sanitizing routines. Although 51% of pet-owners reported that foodborne illnesses may be severe, only 96% were aware that it could lead to a lethal outcome. The risk of foodborne illness, associated with raw meat-based feeding, was perceived to be low by 80% of pet-owners. It was determined that the pet-owners that participated in the questionnaire perceived low susceptibility to foodborne illnesses, but high self-efficacy, which may be an indication of optimistic bias.

Review of raw pet food supplier websites

The review of raw meat pet manufacturer websites (n=13) revealed that 61% of websites did not provide any consumer safety and hygiene guidelines, regarding raw meat-based feeding. The majority (95%) reported confidence that their raw pet food was safe. Pet-owners reported having researched food safety information, regarding raw meat-based pet feeding (Figure 1). The most reported method was speaking to other pet-owners, using social media and searching online. Online forums and social media were cited as ‘trusted’ sources of information.

Significance of study

Given the lack of data about pet-owners perceptions and practices regarding raw meat-based pet feeding, this study has revealed some important findings. Although pet-owners indicated awareness of food safety, potential malpractices were also reported. Moreover, pet-owners showed understanding, of the potential severity of foodborne illness, indicating ‘optimistic bias’. Additionally, the provision of appropriate food safety information from manufacturers of raw pet food was particularly lacking.

Recommendations

• Future observational studies are necessary, in order to determine the actual food safety practices of pet-owners when providing raw pet food.

• There is a need for comprehensive and reliable food safety instructions for pet-owners, practicing raw meat-based feeding.

References


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Quality of food safety information

The majority of websites provided food safety information regarding raw meat-based feeding. However, a significant number of websites did not provide clear instructions, with regards to raw food safety and hygiene, safe storage, thawing, preparation, cleaning and sanitizing procedures. Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive and reliable food safety instructions for pet-owners, practicing raw meat-based feeding.

Layout

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Case study: investigate the prevalence of foodborne illness among pet-owners in the UK, comparing those who provide raw meat-based diets to those who provide manufactured diets.