



“Treating” Shelter Dogs: Healthy, Shelter Friendly Treats for Our Canine Residents

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Who doesn't love to give a dog a treat? And no one deserves a good treat more than a shelter dog waiting for a new home. However, there are a few aspects of being a shelter dog that make giving treats more complicated, and often more dangerous, than in the home environment. Here are a few things to think about:

Shelter dogs are unsupervised upwards of 12 hours a day. This means that more “risky” treats that may work well for privately-owned, well supervised pets in homes are not so safe for shelter dogs.

Shelter dogs have less stability in their life and diet, contributing to stress. Stress colitis is fairly common in dogs from all walks of life, but very common in shelter environments where human contact, food sources, housing spaces, and the influences of other dogs are changing constantly.

Shelter dogs receive treats throughout the day, from many different people. It is possible for a shelter dog to be treated by literally dozens of people a day. The shelter needs to be careful about both amounts and types of treats that dogs receive.

Shelter dogs have differing degrees of dietary tolerances. Unlike a privately owned dog, there is not one person who keenly knows the dietary sensitivity for each dog. Some dogs do well on rich treats, but other dogs do not – and this is not always apparent to the person doing the treating.

Shelter dogs may have unknown levels of resource guarding that could manifest in the treating situation. This could make it unsafe for the visiting public.

Shelter dogs are often undergoing training or behavioral modification while in the shelter. It is important we save the most valuable treats for these episodes (training sessions, medical exams) so that they can be effective.

The truth is, shelter dogs are likely to get more treats than a dog in a private home, because there are simply more people acting in their lives, often without knowing what others are doing.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that for dogs, size doesn't matter. Dogs do not recognize the difference between a large treat or a small treat. Therefore, give the smallest amount that you can; this will still provide the treat experience. Breaking a biscuit into multiple pieces, or using tiny bites of treats is more than adequate, and better for the pet. Furthermore, regular treats for our shelter dogs should be at least minimally healthy, saving the really delicious, no-so-healthy treats as rewards. In our next issue we will talk more specifically about appropriate and inappropriate treats for shelter dogs.

Recommended treats suitable for *daily* use in the shelter:

- Plain dog biscuits or milk bones. High-quality, palatable biscuits are available, and we encourage their use. Remember to use small-sized ones or pieces of larger biscuits, as they don't recognize the difference in size.
- Kongs with less than a teaspoon of peanut butter, squeeze cheese, or cream cheese. Filling the kong is equivalent to a human eating an entire jar of PB. Not healthy.
- Enrichment cubes, balls, or other devices with kibble or biscuits or a few small pieces of "richer" treats mixed in (cheese cubes, small chunks of pupperoni®, etc).
- Baby carrots, thin apple slices (not cores or seeds), air popped popcorn pieces.

Treats appropriate for training sessions or medical exams only:

- A couple of chunks of a "richer" treat (ie a ½ a pupperoni® or snausage® cut into small pieces, very small slices of cheese or lean turkey. Pieces should be no bigger than your pinky fingernail)
- Small amounts of squeeze cheese for pilling, etc.

Treats that should *not* be offered in the shelter environment:

- Real bones of any kind. There are serious health risks that accompany these treats, including but not limited to intestinal obstruction, impaction, pancreatitis and self-injury -- not to mention behavioral concerns with resource guarding. These are not safe for most dogs.
<http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm208365.htm>
- Pigs ears or rawhides. Again, these carry serious risks of esophageal or intestinal obstruction, intestinal upset, and recently have been linked to salmonella outbreaks.
- Raw meat. While some people advocate raw diets in their own pets, these are not suitable for feeding in an uncontrolled shelter environment, and are likely to lead to gastrointestinal upset in our shelter pets.
- Human foods known to be unsafe for dogs. Chocolate, macademia nuts, grapes, sugarless products containing xylitol, and raisins, are just a few of the human foods that can be deadly for dogs. When in doubt, avoid human food.
- Expired products, or bags that have been open and contaminated by rodents. The potential for illness is too great to make feeding these a good idea.

Shelter dogs deserve lots of love and attention, and even edible treats. However, ultimately the shelter's mission is also to keep them healthy in the medically and behaviorally challenging environment of the shelter. While diarrhea, vomiting, or even an intestinal obstruction in an owned pet at home is upsetting and can be expensive, in a shelter setting it can result in removal from the adoption floor; ongoing, expensive treatments; and even euthanasia. Being smart about treats can be lifesaving for shelter residents.