

TO CHEW OR NOT TO CHEW

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Lately we've had many inquiries as regards to what really constitutes a proper chew toy for pets. There certainly are a lot of choices for the average consumer to wade through when shopping for Tucker or Jasper.

Let's start out by saying that chewing is an activity that animals of all kinds enjoy and look forward to. It is often more pronounced in the young, as that is the time when they are cutting and erupting their new adult teeth. Chewing and tearing things is part of the normal course of events that animals go through when obtaining and eating their food. It is an innate, ancestral set of data already hard-wired into their brains from eons ago, long before the days of domestication. Let's face it, we have our knives, cork screws, and can openers, and animals have their teeth, claws and beaks. Life was simpler back in those old days, much as it is for their wild cousins today. When they obtained a meal, they gorged themselves on fresh meat, or whatever they could scavenge. When they wanted to chew they pulled out a nice fat bone, and began to whittle away until they could get the tasty marrow inside. There were always the assorted sticks, hooves, antlers, feathers, and plant parts to play with when wanting a little variety. Wild animals chew for a living literally, and they are pretty good at it. It's not too often that they benefit from a good dental exam or cleaning, nor do they ever really need that anyway. In fact, Dr. Doug, over the years, has examined a lot of skulls, and looked at many wild animals' teeth. For the most part they have maintained their dental health right up until their time of passing. Our domestic pets cannot say the same thing when they are fed most brands of cooked, commercial pet foods. Unless they get a lot of working and chewing on these same ancestral toys, they will be visiting their veterinarians more often than they want to for dental cleaning or even for tooth extractions.

We as responsible, pet caretakers can provide them with items that will mimic the best of what is available from the wild, and some great new inventions as well. Before we mention the best of the best, a little chewing 101 is in order.

There are several sizes and shapes of mouths from the flat-faced pug or Persian cat, up to the pointed muzzle of the greyhound. There are tiny chihuahua mouths, and there are the huge, gaping maws of the English mastiff. Whatever we provide for them when it is fully chewed, must never be too large to safely swallow with ease. Examples of non edible problems are a missing human soft rubber ear plug eaten by a ferret, or a discarded cooked, and dried chicken bone dug out of the garbage by the neighborhood cocker. Whatever our pets chew it is important to abide by the following rules. What goes into the mouth can and often will be swallowed. Make sure the smallest pieces will freely pass through the GI tract easily to avoid obstructions. Next, you must always observe and

monitor the pet while they are chewing, so that you can remove anything that is handled with difficulty, or that is gobbled in parts too large to easily pass through. Know the difference between edible and digestible. Edible means anything that can safely be eaten, while digestible means the parts are broken down, and assimilated by the intestines into nutrients used by the body. What was easily handled yesterday could cause trouble tomorrow if it is gulped, or insufficiently chewed into small enough pieces. Provide very large chewing items for the big mouths, and smaller ones for the little faces.

Some pets will swallow just about anything that can be accommodated in that throat. Dr. Doug has removed bottle caps, soup spoons, rubber squeak toys, earplugs, pork chop bones, rubber balls, hundreds of various size rocks, sewing needles, ribbon, and countless other items. If it fits in the mouth it can and will be swallowed, especially by young puppies, or kittens. Hungry animals, exotic wild cats, and ferrets of all ages are the worst foreign body swallows. Even pet birds will swallow earrings, beads, and assorted other nasty improbables.

What constitutes that best-for-all chew toy? In our opinion, fresh raw bones win hands down, and for various good reasons. First it was the original patented chew that nature intended our pets to eat. Never give cooked bone of any kind (poultry or red meat), or bones with sharp points like T-bones, and pork chops. These will splinter, fragment, and digest very poorly. Fresh, raw bones provide hours of enjoyment, keep the teeth brushed, the gums healthy, and the breath fresh. For best results, the bones should not splinter into sharp pieces, and they should be pre-cut into petite, small, medium or large sizes depending on the size of the mouth. If you have a large, and a small dog you need to be sure the big dog does not get the smaller bone. When in doubt always use larger bones, and pick them up out of reach when not monitoring the animal's activity. Introduce raw bones slowly to avoid diarrhea (take the bone away after a few minutes, and give it back later). Digestive enzyme tablets can be used to insure healthy stools (available at the vet's office or health food store). If too much cartilage is eaten all at once, on knuckle or soup bones there might be some benign vomiting, so again go slow. When dogs eat bones, stools will be chalky colored and that is normal. Cats and ferrets also enjoy chewing on fresh chicken parts with the bones still inside (wings, necks). Dogs will relish this also. Make sure your pet is used to raw meats, and is not a gobbler. If so, then never give whole poultry parts without fully grinding up the meat and bone into a mash. If your pet has unhealthy gums, soft enamel, or loose teeth they may have trouble chewing anything, let alone a bone. If there are digestive troubles, or any other reason to be concerned about raw bones, first ask your veterinarian. Conventional veterinarians are often dead-set against raw bones and meats, while holistic veterinarians will applaud and encourage your efforts to offer a more natural diet.

The next best chew stick is called a "Bullie", and is also cut into various sizes. It is the natural dried bone from a bull's penis. They are clean, healthy, relished by dogs, and are fully digestible. If your dog does not fully chew the stick before swallowing do not use Bullies without supervision. Lastly, the "Greenie" is an immensely popular, and well accepted chew toy. It is available in various sizes, and is made from wheat gluten, chlorophyll and other natural ingredients. Millions have been enjoyed by dogs of all ages

and size. There is at least one Greenie look alike brand that has not been evaluated. Greenies are fully edible, digestible, and are a wonderful dental health treat. They are now the top selling dog treat in America. It is a brilliant product, but over the last few months there has been some very negative press. While it is true that a very few dogs have not chewed sufficiently, swallowed larger chunks, and gotten dangerous or deadly obstructions that required surgery, this is not the fault of the chew toy itself. The caretaker's dilemma has again been a mismatched chew toy for the particular individual dog. This can and does happen with any chew toy or bone on occasion, and is almost always preventable. Remember the rules of chewing 101, and there will be little chance of having a problem.

We now come to rawhide in various dried and rolled shapes, pigs ears, and cow hooves. Dr. Doug does not recommend any of these products as chew toys. The rawhide is often of questionable quality, and can be tanned with chemicals no one should eat. Rawhide, pigs ears, and hooves also can be inadequately chewed, and end up causing a life threatening GI obstruction. Dr. Doug has seen enough of these cases to forewarn folks about using these products without total supervision. Remember that just about anything that can be chewed, can also get stuck from the throat on down. Be proactive and monitor these activities and your pet's dental and mental health will be enriched immensely! Finally for you bird owners, provide lots of non sprayed, fresh cut branches of apple, plum, or vine maple. Leave the bark on, and wash them well. Your bird will spend hours chewing with no less enjoyment than that happy dog devouring a fresh bone. The bird will even get extra nutrition from consuming the edible healthy bark.