

## PETS

# Turning your dog vegan 'can save you thousands in veterinary bills'

Owners weigh animal welfare and cost against nutritional risks.

By Tom Bawden

Not so long ago, veganism was rare. But there are now an estimated 2.5 million vegans in the UK, and others are attempting "Veganuary" – eating only plant-based foods for 31 days – this year.

At the moment, the Veganuary campaign is not open to dogs. A 2019 study found that just 1.6 per cent of dogs were fed a strictly vegan diet, and although the figure is expected to be higher now it is still rare.

But things are changing fast, as vegan and vegetarian dog owners in particular naturally look beyond their own diets to those of their pets. As with themselves, they are driven by environmental and ethical concerns but also, increasingly, by health considerations.

Dogs, like humans, are in the midst of an obesity epidemic. Nearly half the UK's dogs are overweight or obese, with high-calorie diets rich in meaty ingredients seen as a key culprit.

Price is less of an issue as plant-based foods typically lie at the lower end of the premium range, costing less than the top meat-based products but more than those budget meals made up of less desirable animal body parts such as beaks, feathers and intestines.

At the same time, a study by the University of Exeter published this month found that compared to dry dog food, wet, raw and meat-rich products have an enormous climate paw print.

Raising livestock for dog food is a carbon-intensive process, and researchers calculated that feeding an average-sized dog on premium, meat-rich pet food produces up to twice as many diet-related, climate-warming greenhouse gas emissions as the average Briton each year.

Pet food makers have noticed owners want something different. Vegan formulations are the fastest growing category of dog food in terms of new products coming onto the market – although this is from a very low base.

But the trend is clear, as new vegan product launches shot up from just nine in 2020 to 57 in 2024. Over the same period, global sales of plant-based pet food (most of it for dogs) soared from £7.5bn in 2020 to £20bn in 2024. And sales are forecast to accelerate to £43bn by 2034.

As the popularity of plant-based food gathers momentum, scientists are looking more closely at the health implications of vegan diets



Rising vet bills, obesity and environmental concerns are among factors prompting owners to switch dog diets GETTY

for dogs – typically seen as ardent meat eaters – but research is still fairly thin on the ground, especially regarding the long-term impacts.

Any benefits wouldn't only be felt by your pet or the planet either – your wallet would be less strained too. The charity PDSA estimates large dog breeds can cost upwards of £18,800 over a dog's lifetime and Battersea Dogs & Cats Home puts the figure at £2,000 a year, much of it spent on trips to the vet and medicine.

Vet bills can pile up, especially if your pet has an ongoing condition – indeed, the Competition and Markets Authority launched an investigation into the vet market in 2023, and, last October, its provisional decision found "competition problems" which have left many pet owners angry at the amount they are charged for vet services.

Professor Andrew Knight, a former London vet who set up the University of Winchester's Centre for Animal Welfare in 2015 and ran it for eight years, is perhaps the highest-profile expert advocate of plant-based food.

"I lead global research and science communication efforts on this issue, and in the last few years I've seen a huge increase in interest in vegan pet diets, from pet owners, veterinarians, pet food companies

and investors," he told me. He has conducted the most comprehensive research so far into the health benefits of vegan diets for dogs, and is highly encouraged by the results.

One of his projects involving 2,536 dogs – 336 of which had been fed a vegan diet for at least a year – found that pets on plant-based diets were 34 per cent less likely to need medication than those on conventional meat-based diets. And they were 21 per cent less likely to have needed to visit the vet more often – often a sign of developing a new illness – over the previous year.

He also found that the chances of suffering from six common health disorders fell by more than half compared to dogs fed conventional meat, according to the study, published in the journal *Heliyon*.

These included reductions of 61 per cent for body weight disorders, 56 per cent for ear disorders, 58 per cent for musculoskeletal (muscle or bone) disorders and 52 per cent for gastro-intestinal disorders like diarrhoea and vomiting.

"Certain health benefits appear consistent," Knight explains. They include lower rates of obesity and improvements in allergy-related conditions such as itchy skin, ear problems and digestive issues. And, in a separate study involving 2,300 dogs, he found that "on average,

they seem to enjoy commercial vegan pet foods just as much as conventional ones".

But, while a keen advocate of plant-based food, Knight is at pains to stress that dog owners must take great care only to buy food that has all the necessary minerals and other nutrients needed for a healthy diet. As such, he and other vets insist that the food must come from reputable manufacturers which work with nutritional experts and add essential nutrients to ensure nutritional completeness.

The company should also be able to provide some reasonable information about steps taken to ensure nutritional soundness, on their website or in response to inquiries, they say.

Despite the growing evidence that the right vegan diets are healthy for dogs, many vets remain cautious about recommending them. The British Veterinary Association's (BVA) guidelines do not actively recommend any single "best" kind of diet for pets.

If you do opt for a vegan diet, the BVA advises you speak to a vet first and to make sure you choose a diet labelled as "complete" rather than "complementary", as these are designed to meet all of your dog's nutritional needs.

Animal welfare charity Blue Cross, meanwhile, says "dogs can get the nutrition they need on a vegan or vegetarian diet with the right nutritional and veterinary advice".

## News in brief

## FRANCE

## Macron wants fast social media ban

The French President, Emmanuel Macron, has said he wants his government to fast-track the legal process to ensure a ban on social media for children under the age of 15 can enter into force at the start of the next school year in September.

Macron said he had asked his government to initiate an accelerated procedure so the legislation can be passed in time.

"The emotions of our children are not for sale or to be manipulated. Neither by American platforms, nor by Chinese algorithms," Macron said.

## FILM

## 'Overwhelmed' by Oscar nomination

The writer-director behind a short British film nominated for an Oscar last week has said he has been "utterly overwhelmed" by the nod.

Lee Knight's film *A Friend of Dorothy* – about the blossoming friendship between an elderly widow, played by Miriam Margolyes, and a teenage boy, played by Alistair Nwachukwu – was listed in the Best Live Action Short category.

"This is a tough business where rejection is constant and it can be hard to stay afloat," Knight told *The Guardian*.

## PEOPLE



## Harriet turns page after 'Traitors' role

Crime author Harriet Tyce – who hid her background while on *The Traitors* – will be one of the writers featured at a new literary festival celebrating women.

She will be taking part at the Excellent Women Festival at the Holroyd Community Theatre, Shropshire, on 8 March.

Other authors at the event will include Amy Beashel, Carys Green and Jenny Blackhurst.

Tyce (above) will join a panel of authors discussing what women want to read. She identified Rachel as a Traitor in the BBC show but was banished.