

What If My Therapy Dog Eats Poop?

—OR—

ISN'T POOP EATING JUST AS DANGEROUS AS A THERAPY DOG BEING ON A RAW MEAT DIET?

—Dr. Will Eward, TDV Veterinary and Medical Advisor

Dogs eating poop is not nearly as bad as dogs eating raw meat - assuming they're not eating poop from dogs who eat raw meat. The issue with the raw meat - and this is what confuses people - is that raw meat harbors some particularly nasty bugs (especially meat from commercial packing plants). That's why these E. coli and Salmonella outbreaks always make the news - because these bugs cause severe, severe illness and death.

Not that the bacteria in the other gross things that dogs eat (poop, dead squirrels, etc) are pleasant, but they tend to be run-of-the-mill bugs that your dog's immune system (and your immune system) can handle.

So when a busy mother changes her baby's diaper and forgets to wash her hands, she's giving her body a similar challenge as when your dog eats poop (or - everyone's favorite - when your dog gives you a big kiss and it smells like the litter box). The difference is that our bodies can deal with these ordinary "coliform" (from the colon) bacteria quite easily. We're not being exposed to the virulent strains of E. coli or the dreaded Salmonella, Shigella, et al.

So when dogs eat poop - it's not going to hurt them or you - it's just gross.

But when dogs eat raw meat, they're being exposed to a whole different population of bacteria.

When people say, "my dog eats poop - why can't he eat fresh raw meat?" The difference is in the virulent nature of the bugs ("bugs" being slang for "bacteria") in raw meat.

Here's an analogy: Is it gross to drop a dry chip on your clean kitchen floor and then scoop it up and eat it? How about to eat a chip off of a hospital floor? Most people can intuitively say there's a difference there - and they are right. Both chips pick up bacteria on the floor but the bacteria you get on a hospital floor are much more harmful.

Our problem is in the perception. We see a dog eating poop or a dead squirrel as gross but see a dog eating raw chicken as "natural." In fact, poop or a squirrel decomposing in the woods is much, much, much, much safer than eating raw chicken (especially chicken from the grocery store that came from a commercial meat packing plant).

Most people would eat a grape out of the kitchen sink but would never think of eating a grape out of the toilet. In fact (and this has been well-proven), if you eat meat in your home, it is much safer to eat out of your toilet than to eat out of your kitchen sink. Again, it's all a difference in the bacteria.

Our bodies are showered with "run-of-the-mill bacteria" every time we go to the bathroom or brush our teeth. Even a weakened immune system can still deal with these. Just don't let your dog eat poop off a hospital floor or out of a package of ground beef (my attempt at humor).

