

Raw Feeding Information & Finding a Consultant

By Erinn Whitmore

Raw-feeding has a variety of styles, all with the same intention: to feed a biologically-appropriate diet to a carnivore. The various styles can be mingled in numerous ways to best fit the needs of an individual situation, but to understand how this is done, one must first understand the different styles, their benefits and shortcomings, and how to properly prepare, balance, and feed each style. A private consultant aims to assist each client on a personal, case-by-case basis to find what balance works best. *The following is for educational purposes and does not necessarily constitute a menu plan or feeding guide.*

Raw Diets

Whole Prey

Frankenprey/Prey Model

Commercially-Available Raw Diets

Live Prey

Frozen Prey

Raw Meaty Bones & Organs (Balanced Meals)

Raw Meaty Bones and Organs (Week-long Menu Plan)

Frozen Raw Diets (Complete & Balanced)

Frozen Raw Diets (Supplemental)

Freeze-dried Raw Diets

Dehydrated Raw Diets

Whole Prey

- Whole Prey is perhaps the original raw diet, and certainly it has its appeals in numerous ways: each prey meal is fully balanced in its entirety, and it most accurately represents what a wild polecat would eat. Whole prey diets include either live prey or frozen prey items, including mice, rats, guinea pigs, rabbits, quail, pheasant, chicks, frogs and crawfish, and insects such as crickets. Whole prey items include all the bones, organs, muscle meats, and indigestibles necessary to constitute a complete and balanced meal. Whole prey meals are especially good for dental health and digestive health, because the fur and bones brush the teeth as the meal comes in, and work like a pipe-cleaner to clean out the digestive tract as it digests and exits. Whole prey, however, tends to be the most expensive method of raw-feeding, unless one is able to raise and dispatch feeders oneself. For the average raw-feeding ferret owner, whole prey meals tend to make-up only a portion of the diet simply because it can be extremely expensive to feed as a whole diet. While there is some danger of parasitic infection and bacterial transmission through prey diets, it is uncommon, and most raw-feeders agree that prey from reliable sources is a clean and easy method of feeding raw. Ferrets often leave the digestive tract of most prey items and consume everything else. This is an instinctive way to avoid potential pathogens – though I have noticed sometimes my ferrets will consume the intestines. Perhaps they do this when needing roughage or trace minerals?

Frankenprey/Prey-Model

- Frankenprey/prey-model is a style of raw-feeding that utilizes meats, bones, and organs bought from the grocery store, farmer's markets, etc (human foods, usually) and fed in consistent ratios to mimic what would be offered in a whole prey meal. Frankenprey/prey-model meals can be either balanced in each meal (such as would be fed if you owned your own grinder and ground meats, bones, and organs together), or over the course of a week (standard Prey-Model style.) Frankenprey/prey-model feeding requires the most research and guidance as it requires correct nutrient balance in order to be healthful. There is a lot of margin for error in a frankenprey/prey-model diet and this is where a qualified and experienced consultant's guidance is best utilized. Frankenprey/prey-model offers great dental benefits from the chewing and crunching of bones, but this method does have the greatest danger of nutrient imbalances and possible pathogen transmission to humans.

Commercially-Available Raw

- Commercially-available raw diets are probably the easiest and safest raw diets to feed, and many people utilize them regularly for convenience, and also as a way to offer some exotic protein sources. Feeding an entire diet of commercially-available raw foods is popular, also, as these diets are generally complete and balanced, fairly convenient in terms of cleanliness, preparation, and storage, and readily available in many pet retail stores. If choosing to feed a commercial raw product, be sure that the product is at least 95% meat, bone and organ, with 5% or less of indigestible such as vegetables and fruits. Commercial raw foods come in three

basic forms: frozen raw, freeze-dried raw, and dehydrated raw. Frozen is the most straightforward and cost-effective, and generally has the best variety available. Freeze-dried foods are raw foods (usually the same formulation as the frozen raw foods of the same brand) but have been dried using a freeze-drying process, which removes the moisture through sublimation in a frost-free freezer. Dehydrated raw foods are dried using low levels of heat (under 108°F) which removes the moisture from the product while retaining its nutritional integrity. Many people mistakenly believe dehydrated foods are not true raw foods but indeed, food does not cook at the levels of heat that are used in dehydrators. Most brands of commercially-available raw foods utilize a process called high-pressure pasteurization which arguably does affect the integrity of the product; however it does kill off bacteria and parasites, making commercial products very safe for human handlers or immune-compromised pets. Be very aware, however, that not all commercially available raw diets are balanced, and so if using commercial products there are some considerations that need to come into play – if using items not AAFCO approved as complete and balanced, then one would need to follow a menu plan similar to a frankenprey or prey-model style, so as to meet nutritional needs over the course of a week. Commercial diets, because the bones are ground into the product and generally are pretty finely ground, offer no dental health benefits, and so other dental hygiene practices would need to be explored. If choosing to feed commercially-available raw diets, a qualified and experienced consultant will guide you to the brands, flavors, and varieties that are best suited for you ferret(s.)

Finding a Consultant

Knowing your raw-feeding goals are important when consulting with a professional, so reading the above chart and deciding which method or methods you'd like to utilize is an important part of the educational process. Knowing what your limitations may be, either financially, emotionally, or time-wise is also important information to discuss with your chosen consultant so that they are better prepared to help guide you and your ferrets down the path that best suits your lifestyle.

The AFA does not suggest simply taking on the role of transitioning from kibble to raw on your own and highly encourages interested ferret guardians to seek out a partner in the transition process. Locating a reputable raw-feeding consultant can be difficult and confusing. There are several avenues to take when considering transitioning to a raw diet – but it is imperative that you partner with a reputable mentor in order to best arm yourself with knowledge and education. The risk of imbalanced diets is high when people take it upon themselves to transition, without the experience and guidance of a knowledgeable raw-feeder. Sadly, part of why conventional veterinary medicine is so skeptical of raw diets is because of the potential for error, and how common it is to see poorly-developed raw food and homemade diet plans. Veterinarians are absolutely right to be concerned about this, as education on diet and nutrition is necessary in order to thoughtfully balance a diet. However, it isn't rocket science, and most ferret owners are quite capable of feeding a well-rounded diet if given the right tools and partners.

A consultant or mentor can go over safety precautions, the science behind why raw feeding does not pose significant danger of parasitic or bacterial infection, and answer all questions you may have regarding nutrition needs of the domestic ferret.

Two of the most common avenues to look into involve a private consultant, or a raw-feeding community/forum, such as The Holistic Ferret Forum: <http://www.holisticferret60.proboards.com>. HFF does have a significant wait-list for their mentorship program, so take that into consideration when planning your transition. However, their service is free and public, and the forum is a great resource for information.

For private consultations, Erinn Whitmore offers raw diet and nutrition consultations via her website and blog, <http://mustelamania.com>. Erinn has worked in the pet field for several years (both veterinary and retail) and has a personal interest in raw feeding of ferrets. Erinn is a member of the International Association of Carnivore Nutrition Consultants, and specializes in hard-to-switch or unique cases including Irritable Bowel Disease, insulinoma, and other medical conditions that require unique approaches. Read about Erinn at her website for more information.

DISCLAIMER: All information contained in this document is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical or veterinary advice in any way, nor does it constitute any nutrition consultation or mentorship program. The American Ferret Association supports educated and purposeful diet choices whether choosing to feed kibble or raw, and this document is for educational purposes only. The AFA and Erinn Whitmore are not responsible for any injury or imbalance due to raw-feeding, and highly encourage interested ferret guardians to partner with a qualified consultant.