

The Dangers of Rawhide Dog Chew Toys

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Originally appearing in Issue #49, Jul/Aug 2008

The downside of rawhide

“I never buy at Wal-Mart, I only buy organic and nothing from China, ever!”

This is how Danielle Devereux, whose German Shepherd Sammy is a ravenous consumer of snacks, describes her treat-buying strategy. Sammy prefers his rawhide toys soaked in warm chicken broth first. “As you can guess, he’s a little bit spoiled.”

In Devereux’s remarks, I hear echoes of my own long search for the right dog chew toys. From the time my Shepherd was a wee pup, we combed the pet aisles looking for enticing substitutes for couch and chair leg. She quickly sniffed out her favorite section among the knuckle and femur bones: the bins where the rawhide is cached.

Promoted as an “all natural” treat, rawhide does keep dogs entertained, perhaps even more so in its many basted, twisted, even brightly colored mutations. It’s the equivalent of that gummy-worm-fortified cereal made with real oats that children howl for all the way down the breakfast aisle. Those looking to improve on the bone are like the clever marketers who expertly tune a child’s whining pitch. Your dog would like to convince you that rawhide is primal therapy for his carnivorous soul!

But if rawhide manufacturers were held to the same standards as drug makers, they’d be forced to add an equally long list of warnings to their labels: May cause stomach torsion, choking, vomiting, diarrhea, salmonella poisoning and exposure to various chemical residues.

The closer you look at the rawhide gravy train—its tentacles in China, typically, at one point or another—the more you may want to wean your dog off this dubious by-product.

The Dose Makes the Poison

“The most potent compounds for stimulating the taste buds in dogs, and presumably wolves, are amino acids that taste sweet to humans”—so goes the discussion of canid diet in *Wolves*, edited by David Mech and Luigi Boitani. Judging by an explosion of patents for flavored rawhide, which include “tastes” such as bubble-gum and hickory, chew-chefs have apparently done their research. However, in creating treats dogs will chomp for hours, they’ve also produced potentially more toxic products. The more dogs lick, chew and swallow the material, the greater their exposure to any contaminants it contains.

In the case of bubble-gum flavoring alone, the Material Safety Data Sheet reveals a toxic confection containing the carcinogen FD&C Red 40, along with preservatives like sodium benzoate. But tracking the effects of chemical exposure is nearly impossible when it’s a matter of slow, low-dose poisoning. The FDA’s veterinary branch, the Center for Veterinary Medicine, checks into pet food additives only after numerous complaints about a particular chemical.

While chews made from rawhide, bone or other animal parts are consumable, and are therefore considered “food” under FDA law, as long as the label contains no reference to nutritional value (such as “high protein”), the agency advises that manufacturers “may not have to follow the AAFCO pet food regulations.”

Producing rawhide begins with the splitting of an animal hide, usually from cattle. The top grain is generally tanned and made into leather products, while the inner portion, in its “raw” state, goes to the dogs. Removing the hair from hides often involves a highly toxic recipe: sodium sulphide liming. A standard practice is to procure rawhide in the “split lime state” as by-products from tanneries, facilities

that top the list of U.S. Superfund sites. In the post-tannery stage, hides are washed and whitened using a solution of hydrogen peroxide. And that's just one step.

Other poisonous residues that may show up in rawhide include arsenic and formaldehyde. Even dog skin is a possibility. An ongoing investigation of the fur trade by Humane Society International, an arm of the HSUS, resulted in [this information](#), as listed on their website: "In a particularly grisly twist, the skins of brutally slaughtered dogs in Thailand are mixed with other bits of skin to produce rawhide chew toys for pet dogs. Manufacturers told investigators that these chew toys are regularly exported to and sold in U.S. stores."

Back to the Factory (Farm)

There's no knowing where it's been, and where it begins is also unsettling. Rawhide is a by-product of the CAFO—or concentrated animal feeding operation, the bucolic term for today's industrial farm.

"Nasty, brutish and short" is how Ken Midkiff, author of *The Meat You Eat*, describes the life of the animals who give up their hides. He's no expert on rawhide, but Midkiff says he knows far more than he cares to about CAFOs, where thousands of "sentient beings," crammed together inside huge metal buildings, "never see the light of day until the truck comes to pick them up for slaughter."

"There's also a major problem with various drugs," he adds, citing a CAFO cocktail of antibiotics, arsenicals and hormones used to boost production. "While the claim is made that these don't remain in the meat of hogs or beef, that claim has not been tested by any federal agency."

Pattie Boden, owner of The Animal Connection in Charlottesville, Va., where organic toy enthusiasts shop, doesn't carry rawhide. Instead, she stocks free-range chews, bully sticks, and organic raw bones, from shins to lamb necks. Her purchasing-protocol (and philosophy) is one owners might apply in their own search for healthful treats.

"I'm not going to be the most financially successful pet store," Boden says, "but I feel confident in the products I select, and I can sleep at night."

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