Grain Free Diets and the Estrela Mountain Dog.

Skin and ear issues such as ‘hot spots’ are a well known problem for many estrela mountain dogs (more on this topic at a later date), so it’s no wonder owners have this in mind when choosing their dogs’ food. There are also growing concerns around so called ‘boutique, exotic, grain free diets (BEGs) and their link to dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM). So what is the discerning estrela owner to do?\*

Reasons to feed grain free:

1. “Dogs evolved from wolves and should be fed accordingly.” Polar bears evolved from grizzlies approximately 11,000 years ago. Grizzlies are around 90% vegetarian – I don’t think a polar bear would be impressed with a grizzly diet! Dogs evolved... stop right there. They evolved. They are their own species. Dogs produce 11 times\*\* more amylase than wolves. Amylase is the digestive enzyme for carbohydrates. There is evidence going back to at least the Bronze Age that dogs have always eaten what we do and if we look at people who are still living the nomadic shepherd lifestyle, their livestock guardian dogs are fed bread and the whey left over from making cheese. That’s it. The dogs might also eat dung, scavenge dead animals or hunt up the occasional rodent but the people themselves only eat meat about once a month if they are lucky so the dogs are rarely, if ever, fed meat. Coming back to Portugal, the dogs might get a fed a soup of rice and leftovers, the shepherd might share his scraps but still the dogs are not fed a lot of meat – it’s too valuable! Be warned, if you try to tell me your dog is a wolf or should be treated like one, I will throw my banana at you.
2. “Grains cause food allergies in dogs.” Except they don’t. Or at least very rarely. 87% of food allergies in dogs are allergies to meats. Every estrela I have heard of that has had a diagnosed food allergy, was allergic to specific meat(s). This might seem counterintuitive as we hear so much marketing about gluten intolerances etc but if your dog has a food allergy, a meat protein is the most likely culprit.
3. “Grain free food is more nutritious.” Except grains *are* nutritious and our dogs can digest them because they have evolved to eat them. How nutritious a food is depends on its digestibility and the balance of nutrients. Being grain free doesn’t automatically make a food more nutritious.

Reasons not to feed grain free:

1. Food allergies. No, that’s not a typo! One of the problems with BEG diets is that if a dog does actually have a food allergy, the first thing the vet will tell you to do is to switch to a novel food – one that your dog hasn’t eaten before. If your dog pretty much lives on chicken and rice based food, that’s easy, you just switch to salmon and potato or whatever. If your dog is eating venison, ostrich, kangaroo, duck, with peas, sweet potato etc etc, finding a novel food becomes increasingly difficult.
2. Nutrition. These grain free diets are developed almost exclusively by hobbyists. Whether we are talking about ‘prey model’ RAW feeding or Frank and Sally’s natural garden kitchen holistic complete food for wolves, these diets have been developed, on the whole, by amateurs. No matter how good their intentions or how much reading they have done, that doesn’t equate to being a qualified nutritionist. A nutritionist has also done the reading but they have had academic supervisors to check what reading they have done, for flaws in their logic and exams to check they actually understand that reading etc.
3. Dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM). This is a heart condition which can already affect estrela mountain dogs anyway. For some, as yet unknown, reason, there seems to be a link between these BEG diets and dogs developing DCM. When dogs are switched back onto a nutritionally complete, grain inclusive food, the progress of the disease can be halted and even reversed – not something that happens when the disease is purely genetic in origin – adding weight to the conclusion that it is the diet that is causing the problem. It may be that the grains themselves contain or help the dog to process the nutrients needed for a healthy heart, or it may be that the alternative ingredients being used instead are causing the problem.

In summary, the claimed benefits of grain free foods are, at best, misguided and more cynically, marketing ploys. Unless your dog is diagnosed with a specific grain allergy, there is no reason to avoid grains in your dog’s food, quite the opposite, the risk of DCM from feeding BEG foods, whilst not fully understood, is all too real. Make sure your dogs diet, whether homemade or complete, is made / designed by qualified nutritionists.

Oh, and give them a biscuit from me,

Nichola xxx

\*This information was taken from the seminar by Dr Rosario Cerundolo, asst. prof. dermatology university of Nottingham and this fantastic summary of the currently available literature which can be found here: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2020&context=honors&fbclid=IwAR0NUg318HITzE9ZFiqpi5tgdYzgKyFf7uvurrirY4IbOxlnxdgZXES5yPI

\*\* Less for some artic breeds where both people and dogs would have eaten less grains and more meat, although still more than wolves.