

Choosing a good quality pet food

Choosing a pet food can be a daunting and confusing process. The pet food industry is growing and competitive, with companies all trying to find their niche. Marketing, consumer driven trends, loop holes in food labeling laws, and well intentioned but unproven beliefs about pet nutrition continue to muddy the waters. Below is advice compiled from board certified veterinary nutritionists on how to cut through the chatter and identify a good quality pet food for your furry family member. Remember to gradually mix and transition food slowly over 1-2 weeks when making a pet food change, even between different flavors or formulations of the same brand.

Ask these questions when choosing a pet food. For information not readily available on the label, such as dry matter analysis and manufacturing methods, manufacturers should have these answers readily available when contacted (if they do not, this is a red flag).

- 1) Make sure there is an AAFCO statement on the label claiming that the food is complete and balanced. This statement indicates the food has passed the minimum standards required to be fed as a sole source of nutrition.
- 2) Make sure the diet is appropriate for your pet's species (no dog food for cats please), breed, age/life stage, and medical history. For example, a dog with a history of pancreatitis will require a low fat food, while a kidney patient will benefit from something lower in protein. Careful about using over the counter diets for food allergies—cross contamination of ingredients with other foods is common and ingredients often change depending on market availability. For these animals, a prescription diet will likely be more appropriate. Talk to your veterinarian about the best therapeutic diet if your pet has health problems. Avoid “all life stage” diets in older animals as these are actually diets made for growing pets. Also note that it's important for large and giant breed puppies to be fed large breed puppy food until 18 months of age to help reduce the risk of joint disease.
- 3) Look for a “manufactured by X brand” statement on the label. If it says “manufactured for X brand”, then the company on the label is likely just the marketing arm that outsources food production and they may not be monitoring the quality of the product.
- 4) Identify a trustworthy manufacturer. This is a more important indicator of quality than the ingredient list. Look for manufacturers that conduct preproduction, production, and postproduction food safety testing, are responsive to questions, perform product research, and employ board certified veterinary nutritionist or PhD animal nutritionists to formulate the diets. If a manufacturer has never had a recall this does not mean they are producing good food—they may simply not be testing it.
- 5) Don't get too caught up in the ingredient list. While the first 5 ingredients should be recognizable as food, there are a lot of tricks that can be used to make the ingredient list appear more attractive to consumers. Also, the bad reputation of byproducts is primarily a marketing ploy. Byproducts are simply meat cuts that didn't make it into the human food supply but are still great sources of protein and nutrients. The only animals that should avoid byproducts are patients with liver disease as they should not be eating organ meat. For cats, be sure an animal protein is listed in the first five ingredients as cats have a higher protein requirement than dogs.
- 6) Do not put too much stock in the macronutrients listed on the label. The protein, fat and carbohydrate percentages on the label are on an “as fed” basis unless stated otherwise, and are usually listed as maximums and minimums rather than the actual amount. A truer representation of the macronutrient content of a diet is the dry matter analysis (analysis performed once all moisture has been removed from the food, even kibble), which the manufacturer should be able to readily supply if you contact them. In general, healthy cats should be eating 35-45% or more dry matter protein in their food and healthy dogs should be eating 20-30% dry matter protein.
- 7) Be skeptical of marketing buzzwords, such as human grade, organic, natural, premium, gourmet, and holistic, as there are no official rules governing the use of these words on pet food labels. Also, “grain free” pet food is a consumer trend driven by marketing rather than nutrition science. There are no proven health benefits to a grain free diet for healthy cats and dogs. In terms of food allergies, dogs and cats are much more likely to be allergic to a meat source rather than a grain. Grains are not fillers. They provide fiber to support GI health, as well as protein, carbohydrates, and fat. A properly formulated grain free diet can be complete and balanced. However, there has been an increase in nutrition related heart disease that may be linked to improperly formulated grain free diets. If going grain free, be extra sure the manufacturer is reputable and providing a well formulated diet developed by veterinary nutritionists.

A note on homemade and raw diets: If you wish to pursue homemade pet food, special care must be taken to ensure all the appropriate vitamins and minerals are present, as well as the correct portions of carbs, fat and protein to prevent nutritional deficiencies and diseases from occurring (95% of homemade pet diet recipes found online are deficient in at least one nutrient). Be sure pet food recipes are from expert, trusted sources. Petdiets.com and balanceit.com are two veterinary nutritionist-run sites that can help you formulate recipes if you are interested in homemade pet food. As for raw diets, the American Animal Hospital Association (whose statement has also been endorsed by the American Association of Feline Practitioners and the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians) and American Veterinary Medical Association have released consensus statements against the feeding of raw meat or eggs to pets as this can pose a risk to both the animal's wellbeing and human health. For more information, visit: aaha.org/professional/resources and www.avma.org/kb/policies.

