

Understanding Dog and Cat Food Labels

By Dr. Holly Burgess, DVM

When comparing pet foods there are several rules you should know before buying:

Quality/Quantity of Ingredients: Ideally you should contact the company, or research the website if applicable, and find out two things: where do their ingredients come from and what quality of ingredients do they use prior to processing. You want to know - is the meat from "4-D" meat sources - animals that are dead, dying, diseased, or disabled? Are animals treated with antibiotics or hormones? Were pesticides and residues used during cultivation; grains grown in poor soil lack needed vitamins and minerals. There are some extremely conscientious companies that pride themselves on the quality of the ingredients they use and will be more than happy to discuss this with consumers.

Meat: The dog and cats digestive systems are designed to process meat; therefore it makes sense that meat should be listed as the first ingredient on the label. Since ingredients are listed on food labels in descending order by weight, we ideally want several animal based protein sources listed within the first five (5) ingredients. You want to see the words meat or meat based (i.e. turkey meat, chicken meat) on the label; this can include muscle meat (tongue, heart, esophagus, overlying fat, and skin, nerves, and blood vessels). Meat or meat based is ideal as the following types of meat ingredients actually decrease in quality:

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| <i>Meat meal</i> | rendered meal made from animal tissue |
| <i>Meat By-Product</i> | clean parts of slaughtered animals, not including muscle (organ meats, bone, blood, stomach, cleaned intestines) |
| <i>Animal By-Product</i> | rendered animal tissue, which does not fit in other categories |
| <i>Animal Digest</i> | under-composed animal tissue that is broken down using chemical or emblematic hydrolysis |

Grain/Starch: Grains are commonly used as protein sources in pet foods, as they are less costly. Remember grain is not a part of the wild carnivores' diet and most domestic dogs and cats do much better when grains are omitted from their diet. However, dry food will not stay in kibble form without the addition of grain or some starch, thus if you choose to feed a dry food you should scrutinize the quality of the grain or starch in the diet. If grains are present, then whole grains are best i.e. barley, oatmeal, quinoa, brown rice etc. Grain meals i.e. corn gluten meal, brewers rice, are by products collected after manufacturing of more nutritious parts of the plant. Grain meals are less desirable than whole grain. Due to the high incidence of corn and wheat allergies in dog and cats, we recommend neither of these grains.

The many new "grain free" diets currently on the market use higher quality (and quantity) of meat protein - much closer to the natural carnivore diet, however they do contain starch i.e. potato, sweet potato, pea, or tapioca as starch helps bind the kibble together. Like grain, these substances do not mirror the natural diet of the dog or cat. Both grains and starch are recognized by the body as sugar and are easily converted to fat, which leads to blood sugar fluctuations, and can lead to problems with insulin resistance. Sugar also decreases immune system function, an inadvisable process for pets suffering from infections or cancer. Unfortunately being processed means both dry (kibble) and canned foods will never exactly mirror a fresh food diet.

Preservatives: Dry pet food must be preserved either naturally or chemically in order to maintain a shelf life. Naturally preserving your pet's food using Vitamin E (mixed tocopherols) and C is a better alternative to using man made chemicals. They too have a shelf life however, therefore it is best to buy a smaller bag of food and/or freeze the unused portion until it is needed.

Preservatives to avoid include:

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| <i>BHA and BHT</i> | associated with liver damage, fetal abnormalities, and metabolic stress |
| <i>Ethoxyquin</i> | incited as causing cancer, liver, kidney, and thyroid dysfunction |
| <i>Propylene Glycol</i> | causes irregularities in red blood cell |
| <i>Propyl Gallate</i> | can cause stomach and skin irritations |
| <i>Sodium Nitrate</i> | produces carcinogenic substances called nitrosamines |

Unfortunately, some of these man made chemicals are empirically added, in some instances by (US) law, to meat meals prior to being purchased by pet food manufacturers. Thus, they are not listed on the food label despite their presence in the food. Remember, all of these caveats can be avoided with a fresh, whole food diet!

Dyes: Dyes have no nutritional value. They make the food more pleasurable to the consumer. They should not be in your pets' food!

Summary: Remember no one diet will benefit every dog or cat. You will need to study and use these rules to find the foods that work for your pet. If his/her digestive tract allows, we strongly recommend you routinely rotate different brands, varieties, and meat sources in your pet's diet. Each brand of food has different nutrient profiles so by feeding a wide variety of foods you will not only make mealtime interesting for your pet, you can insure that he/she is getting all the needed nutrients to stay healthy. Variety also keeps the digestive system "tuned up" and able to cope with new foods without digestive upset. If feasible, think about adding raw or home-cooked foods to your dog or cat's diet whenever possible. *There is no substitute for fresh, real food.* Still not sure? Think about this - would we remain healthy if we ate Total(tm) cereal, which is 100% "complete", three times daily for 10 years? No! Our bodies rely on a multitude of different meats, vegetables, fruits, and whole grains to stay healthy, why shouldn't it be the same for our pets??

Some brand names that adhere to the above standards -

Fresh Whole Food diets:

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| Honest Kitchen | Dehydrated: several grain-free (Force, Embark, Love, Zeal) and vegetable pre-mixes (Preference, Kindly), dehydrated, fresh dog and cat food formulations. Website: www.honestkitchen.com |
| Natures Variety | Dehydrated & RAW: fully prepared for dogs and cats. Website: www.naturesvariety.com |
| Primal | RAW: fully prepared, human-grade formulas for dogs and cats Website: http://www.primalpetfoods.com/ |
| Darwin's | RAW: fully prepared no grain, human-quality, USDA-approved meats and vegetables without steroids, hormones or chemical preservatives, Website: www.darwinspet.com/ |
| Stella & Chewy's | Dehydrated & RAW: fully prepared for dogs and cats. Website: https://www.stellaandchewys.com/ |

Grain-free processed diets:

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| Natures Variety | Instinct formulations (kibble or canned) are grain-free for dogs and cats. Website: www.naturesvariety.com |
| Orijen | Grain-free dry food formulas for dogs and cats. Website: www.championpetfoods.com |
| Fromm | Grain-free dry food formulas for dogs and cats. Website: http://frommfamily.com/ |
| ZiwiPeak | Air-dried and canned grain-free formulations for dogs and cats. Website: www.ziwipeak.com |
| Wellness | CORE formulation contains no grain - for dogs and cats Website: www.wellnesspetfood.com |
| Wild Callings | All natural, grain-free; 96% meat; all meat purchased or produced in the USA Website: http://wildcalling.com/ |

If your pet is not accustomed to eating several varieties of foods, an abrupt change can cause digestive upset. It is best to switch over a 7-10 day period.

Start with about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the new formulation and mix with $\frac{3}{4}$ of the current diet for 2-4 days. Continue to slowly transition $\frac{1}{2}$ new: $\frac{1}{2}$ old then $\frac{3}{4}$ new: $\frac{1}{4}$ old, then 100% of the new. Canned pumpkin contains a large quantity of colon healthy fiber and is an excellent supplement during any food transition. Start with 1-3 tsp per meal for cats and small dogs and 2-4 TBLS per meal for large dogs. A probiotic (gut friendly bacterial organisms) can be invaluable during the transition. Several that we recommend include Lactenz & Prosynbiotic by Standard Process and FortiFlora by Purina Veterinary Diets. Please let us know if we can assist you in a diet transition.

For a good website resource to learn IN DEPTH information about almost every pet food on the market visit: <http://www.dogfoodproject.com>

WHAT SHOULD I FEED MY DOG AND CAT?

By Dr. Holly Burgess, DVM

Food Myths

True or False? Feeding your dog or cat human food is bad. FALSE! In fact, a well-balanced home prepared diet, cooked or raw, is the healthiest diet you could feed your carnivore friend as these diets provide fresh whole human quality foods that lack dyes and preservatives. (See our handout *Understanding Dog Food Labels* for more information regarding these specific issues).

First, let's explore the history of commercial pet food.

Before commercial pet foods were available, farm dogs and cats ate meat, eggs, milk, food found via scavenging, and/or table scraps. In 1860, the first processed dog biscuit was manufactured from wheat, beetroot, vegetables, and beef blood. After that, several companies followed suit with baked dog food products. During the 1930's Depression era owners looked for less expensive methods of feeding their pets by introducing more grain and cereal products into their home prepared diets. After World War II, dry pet food sales increased considerably when mill operators and grain dealers found a market for their byproducts; pet food manufacturers argued that dogs and cats could be fed at lower costs with these by-products.

By the 1960's pet food marketers were hailing processed foods for their convenience, labeling them as "complete" (no additional foods or supplements needed), and began advising the public that table scraps could actually be dangerous to their pets' health. The 1970's brought about the celebrity TV pet food commercials, introducing kibble of different sizes, shapes, and colors to appeal to the consumers' palate. By the late 1970's and 1980's specialty diets surfaced with pet food companies portraying nutrition as extremely complex with diets necessary for different diseases and stages of life.

Since the early 1990's consumers have become more proactive in their pets health care, educating themselves in the art of interpreting pet food labels and are thereby demanding fewer chemical preservatives and by-products in their pets' food. Unfortunately, most pet foods today still rely heavily on grain, grain fillers, and grain by-products. The bottom line? Pet foods are designed to appeal to consumers at LOWER COSTS rather than as an enhancement to our pet's HEALTH.

Thankfully, there are several conscientious pet food companies distributing high quality protein, no grain pet foods.

Are these better than the processed food mentioned above? The answer is yes. Can these foods be considered equal to a balanced home prepared or raw diet? The answer is NO! Cooking, or processing, has a major impact on the quality of the ingredients that are used. Most kibble and canned diet formulations are heated to 195-220F. At these temperatures important amino acids, methionine and histidine are destroyed while other amino acids bond with carbohydrates, which interfere with protein digestibility. While high protein no grain (kibbled) diets do not contain grain they still contain simple starches (potato, lentils, peas or tapioca) which convert to glucose or sugar; thus they are not low carbohydrate. Too much sugar can, over time, lead to decreased immunity, accelerated tumor growth, diabetes, and hyperactivity, to name a few.

If you learn nothing else from your veterinary visit today, I hope you begin to realize how much of a difference you can make in the health of your pet when you take responsibility for improving his or her diet. Yes, initially it can cost more, but overall long-term costs decrease due to fewer vet visits for chronic conditions such as allergies, diabetes, arthritis, even cancer. Although genetics play a part in many of these disease processes, early diet intervention will go a long way in minimizing their onset, medical maintenance, and in many cases can vastly alter the severity of suffering your pet experiences. Be assured, if you are visiting us today for a Nutritional Response Testing/alternative medicine consultation, we will be addressing your pets' diet. **SUPPLEMENTS DO NOT COMPENSATE FOR A POOR DIET!**

So, what makes fresh food diets so different and beneficial for our carnivore friends?

The eating habits of wild carnivores have been studied in depth and should influence the diets we feed our domestic carnivores. Wild carnivores consume raw foods primarily made up of protein and roughage (poorly digestible parts of animal carcasses such as bone, cartilage, scales, fin, fur, feather, tendon, and teeth). Their diet is low in carbohydrates and contains no grain. In fact, wild carnivores do not have digestive enzymes in their saliva, necessary to begin the process of breaking down complex carbohydrates. Carnivores' digestive tracts are one-third the length of the omnivore (plant eater) and are designed for the quick digestion of meat. They have a higher concentration of hydrochloric acid in the stomach that breaks down proteins. They chew their food minimally and prefer to swallow large portions of carcasses at one time. This beneficial process is far removed from even the most premium dry dog or cat foods.

Proponents of raw food diets claim that many of the degenerative disease states our pets are experiencing today are due, at least in part, to the processed diets we feed them. The extreme temperatures used in the processing of pet foods damages beneficial oils and fatty acids, denatures important enzymes, and causes complexes to form between proteins and starches, vitamins and minerals, and minerals and minerals, a process which creates decreased absorption and nutrient availability for the animal. Add to that toxin from diseased carcasses, refined sugars, salt, colorings, and artificial flavorings; all of which are major players in producing degenerative diseases. All of these factors affect the digestibility of a diet (quantity of food actually absorbed by the animals system) as well. In summary, dogs and cats have evolved to eat food that is primarily fresh meat. Their gastrointestinal tract is specialized towards a largely carnivorous, low carbohydrate diet, which is evidenced, by their teeth and jaw structure, their lack of carbohydrate digesting enzymes in their saliva, and the low pH of their stomach.

What to do?!

I hope we have empowered you with the belief that a fresh, whole food diet will not only make your pet happy but will improve his/her overall health. If this means adding fresh food to a canned or premium kibble diet, or feeding a fresh diet several meals a week, these small steps will greatly improve your pets' health.

Humans feed themselves a varying menu of many types of foods therefore we recommend you routinely rotate different brands, varieties, and meat sources in your pet's diet as well. Each brand of food has different nutrient profiles so, by feeding a wide variety of foods, you will make mealtime interesting for your pet and insure that he/she is getting all the needed nutrients to stay healthy. Variety also keeps the digestive system "tuned up" and able to cope with new foods without digestive upset.

If you are interested in preparing your pets food or purchasing a pre-made raw food diet please discuss this with your veterinarian before you start as we can provide balanced recipes for you. If you want to learn more about feeding raw food please review the following websites and read at least one of the following short books:

Book Resources:

The BARF Diet by Dr. Billinghurst: www.barfworld.com
Natural Nutrition for Dogs and Cats - The Ultimate Diet by Kymythy R. Schultz
Dr. Becker's Real Food for Healthy Dogs and Cats by Karen Shaw Becker and Beth Taylor

Website Resources for feeding your pets:

<http://www.dogfoodproject.com/>
<http://healthypets.mercola.com/>
<http://www.dogaware.com/>
<http://catinfo.org/>

| Frozen RAW Foods | Kibble: High Protein/Grain-free | Dehydrated, Air Dried or Freeze Dried |
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| Darwin's | Orijen | Honest Kitchen |
| Primal | Nature's Variety Instinct | Ziwi Peak |
| Nature's Variety Instinct | Fromm | Wysong |
| Stella and Chewy's | Wellness CORE | Stella and Chewy's |
| | Wild Callings | Nature's Variety |

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| <i>Darwin's (Raw: frozen):</i> | www.darwinpet.com |
| <i>Primal (Raw: frozen):</i> | www.primalpetfoods.com |
| <i>Nature's Variety (Raw: Frozen or dehydrated, kibble or canned):</i> | www.naturesvariety.com |
| <i>Stella and Chewy's (Raw: Frozen or dehydrated):</i> | www.stellaandchewys.com |
| <i>Orijen (Kibble):</i> | www.championpetfoods.com/orijen/about |
| <i>Fromm (Kibble or canned):</i> | http://frommfamily.com/ |
| <i>The Honest Kitchen (Raw: Dehydrated):</i> | www.Honestkitchen.com |
| <i>Wysong Archetype (Raw: Dehydrated):</i> | www.wysong.net |
| <i>Ziwi Peak (Raw: Air dried, canned) :</i> | www.ziwipeak.com |