

Navigating the pet food aisles!



Navigating the pet food aisle can be tricky: A pet food label numbers and percentages can easily be misinterpreted, and marketing claims may lack regulatory definitions or evidence to support them. Choosing your cat or dog's food is a big decision, and one that should be made with your veterinarian's guidance. But it doesn't hurt to know a little about how to decode those labels.

The reality is that the “best” pet food is the one that meets the unique nutrient and energy needs of your pet's life stage and health status, and that's a decision you should make with your veterinarian.

Things you should keep in mind when reading pet food labels:

1. Feed a diet that's right for your pet's life stage – LOOK FOR THE AAFCO STATEMENT

Your cat or dog's nutritional needs will change throughout her life. A good baseline for determining which foods may meet those needs is the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) Nutritional Adequacy Statement. The statement will appear on the food's label if the AAFCO has determined that the diet contains all the nutrients in the right balance to meet a pet's nutritional needs specific life stages (growth, gestation/lactation, maintenance, etc.). The statement will also say that this has been determined by either 1) that the diet has been formulated to meet nutritional profiles for the life stage and species indicated, OR 2) that the diet has passed feeding trials to prove that it provides adequate nutrition.

2. Don't get too caught up in the ingredient list – PETS NEED NUTRIENTS, NOT INGREDIENTS

When it comes to evaluating the nutritional value of a food, don't focus too much on the ingredient list. Nutrients are more important than ingredients, which are just vehicles for the nutrients – and you can't always tell which ingredient packs more nutrients than another. Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight, with many “*chemical-sounding*” minor ingredients listed toward the end. But Amy Farcas, DVM, DACVN, a board-certified specialist in veterinary nutrition by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition, says that many of these ingredients are actually essential vitamins and minerals.

3. Understand that byproducts aren't necessarily bad – ANIMALS NEED BYPRODUCTS

There's a lot of talk – and seemingly endless opinions – about byproducts. AAFCO defines byproducts as “secondary products produced in addition to the principal product.” This may include organs, many of which are nutritionally valuable. You can imagine that there are lots of different kinds of organs that are nutritionally diverse – a mixture of lungs and fat are a byproduct meal and very nutritionally different than a heart and liver mixture, which would be higher in vitamin and mineral content and higher in protein. Both mixtures are considered byproduct meal on the label.

4. Don't fear preservatives – KEEP FOOD FROM GOING RANCID

According to board-certified veterinary nutrition specialists, some chemical preservatives have been determined to be safe for animals. There is not necessarily a reason to discount chemical preservatives outright. Still, if you make the personal choice to buy pet food with only natural preservatives, ask your

veterinarian which kind to feed and how to store it, because without preservatives, it will become rancid or spoil much faster than food with preservatives.

5. Be aware of marketing ploys and gimmicks – WHAT DO THE LABELS MEAN

Sometimes clever packaging on pet food touts phrases such as *organic*, *natural*, *human-grade*, *premium*, *holistic*, or any other adjective you can imagine. But understanding what these terms mean for pet food can be tricky. The definition of the term *organic* is determined by the National Organic Program, which is administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). *Natural* is more complicated: the AAFCO has a specific definition of the term, but the USDA has declined to define it. And the rest of those terms? Some have NO agreed-upon definitions at all. So just remember a food with a fancy marketing claim may not be the best one for YOUR pet.

6. Know that not all types of protein are the same – CONSIDER THE PROTEIN SOURCE

If you want to understand your pet's protein needs, it's important to understand how to evaluate protein quality. Proteins are compilations of amino acids, and a protein has to be digestible in order for the body to absorb those amino acids. If there's a ton of something we don't need, and not enough of something we do need, then that's not a very good protein source, because you would have to eat a lot more of it to meet the minimum amount that's in the smallest quantity. Things you should know about protein:

- The protein quantity in the guaranteed analysis can be very misleading. It's not usually possible to use to fairly compare two diets to each other.
- For most healthy pets, a diet that's higher than average in protein isn't necessarily better than one with an average amount of protein content.
- It's not possible to determine the protein content of a diet from the INGREDIENT list.

7. The right amount to feed your pet may be different than the recommendation on the label – HOW MUCH

Some labeling on pet food may contain instructions on how much to feed, but you should always follow your veterinarian's instructions on the proper portion for your individual pet. Your vet understands how many calories and which nutrients your cat or dog requires. Many vets will make recommendations (or alter existing recommendations) for amounts based on a cat or dog's physical exam and body condition score.

Anytime you feed your pet a new food or a new package of a customary food, observe his reaction. If he shows symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, or lethargy, stop feeding the product and take your pet to the vet. Keep the packaging and any leftover food in case you need to file a complaint.



Some veterinary suggested brands:

- Hill's Science Diet
- Royal Canin
- Purina
- Iams
- Eukanuba