

How to Read a Pet Food Label

One of the most common questions we are asked is "What should I feed my pet?" Since the most important contribution you can make to your pet's health and well being is his or her daily diet, it's a question that deserves a good answer. This article explains how to read a pet food label to determine how good the nutrition is inside the bag or can.

First of all, with pet foods, as with most other things, you get what you pay for. The first thing to check on the bag of food is the price. Cheap dog and cat foods use cheap ingredients, have poor quality control, are not well digested and may have excesses or deficiencies in vital nutrients, which can harm your pet. When analyzed in a laboratory, many generic and store brand foods do not actually contain the level of nutrition stated on the label. Discounted food may also be old and stale. Certain nutrients, such as vitamin A, degrade over time. So, to get the nutrition you are paying for, choose a well known brand name and don't purchase something that costs \$7 for 40 lbs. on sale, no matter how good the company is.

If you compare the daily cost of feeding a premium brand of food such as Science Diet with the daily cost of feeding a store brand, you may be surprised at how little the difference in price actually is. Canned Science Diet foods are especially reasonable, costing less to feed per day than 5 of the 9 most popular brands of canned food available in grocery stores.* This daily cost factor is important - since good foods are more digestible and provide more nutrients per pound, you will often have to feed much less. Sometimes you need three times as much cheap food to maintain a pet's weight as you would of a premium food. The cost of the less expensive food is then three times higher than it would first appear.

Pet food manufacturers must adhere to many regulations that govern what goes into the food and what goes on the label, which we'll explain in a minute. However, pet food companies spend outrageous amounts of money on advertising and labeling, to make you think you are getting more than you paid for, while skimping on what actually goes into the food. The pet food industry is also not well policed. Chances are good that many small companies cheat on their labels, because they know that no one is checking up on them anyway.

So, it is best to try to choose a diet based on logic, science and the reputation of an established company, rather than on what looks good to you or has the fanciest ads. Companies that are not well established rarely have the resources to have their foods properly analyzed and tested and they are likely to cut corners. Their full color brochures and fancy packaging may conceal a big rip off.

It always surprises us how many people are feeding their pets sub-optimal diets while at the same time wanting good care for the pet in other ways. Spend a little more for the food and you'll have a healthier pet. On the other hand, some expensive pet food brands don't provide very good nutrition, either. At least as many clients paying too little are paying high prices for nutritionally inadequate or unproven diets recommended by untrained pet store employees. Why believe someone who not only has no background in nutrition but may even still be in high school about the quality of a food instead of your veterinarian, who had years of nutritional training?

Stick with one of the main companies we recommend and don't be talked into something you haven't heard of before. We're in the business of providing health care, not pet food, so our primary interest is in your pet's health and well-being. The pet store wants to get repeat business for a brand that you have to come to them to buy. Now that good foods like Science Diet and Iams are available to outlet and grocery stores, they want to switch you to a diet that isn't. We are

happy to provide you with a list of foods we think are good and which ones to stay away from, but new ones crop up all the time. If you're not sure, don't buy it.

As of January 1, 1984, regulations require that the labels of all pet foods (except those clearly identified as a snack, or those intended for use by and under the supervision of a veterinarian) contain a statement that indicates that the product "meets or exceeds the nutrient requirements set by the National Research Council (NRC)." The statement indicates that, "when fed as the sole diet without any other food or supplements, the food meets NRC requirements for": "gestation" (pregnancy); "lactation" (nursing mothers); "growth;" or "adult maintenance;" or that it is "sufficient for all stages." If adequate for all stages the label usually states "complete and balanced for all dogs" or "all cats." In order to earn this label, the food must contain at least the minimum of each nutrient as recommended by the NRC, **OR** (this is very important) it must pass feeding tests conducted according to protocols approved by the American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO).

Sounds good, doesn't it?

The problem is that requirements are not optimal requirements. They are *MINIMAL* requirements. These minimal levels may not be adequate for animals that are stressed by weather, parasites, disease, heavy exercise or a host of other things.

Conversely, excesses can be just as harmful as deficiencies. Excess protein, salt, fat, magnesium and other ingredients can be very harmful. It is therefore not wise to feed any food that has been marketed without good feeding trials. A food that has not been tested on actual live dogs or cats may:

1. contain nutrient deficiencies or excesses.
2. contain toxic substances which may be harmful. For instance, some calcium sources used in pet foods may be contaminated with heavy metals, such as lead. The melamine contamination that killed thousands of dogs in 2010 was discovered by companies doing feeding trials of diets that contained the contaminant.
3. not be palatable to the animal, who may then not eat enough to meet his or her nutritional needs.
4. not be digestible by the dog or cat. Just because it is in the foods doesn't mean it's available to the pet. Low cost pet foods contain low cost ingredients (such as chicken necks and gristle) which are not digestible and will not provide adequate nutrition to your pet.

This brings us to the guaranteed analysis. All pet food labels are required to carry this guaranteed analysis, which lists the percentages of the basic components of the food. The guaranteed analysis will look something like this:

Moisture (this means water) Max. 60%
Protein..... Min. 10%
Fat Min. 20%
Fiber Max. 5%
Ash (this includes the minerals) Max. 5%

Unfortunately, this again tells you very little about the actual quality of the food. A minimum of 10% protein means the protein level could be 10%, 50% or somewhere in between. Since so much of a diet can be water (0-60%, according to the label), the actual percentage of nutrients should be based on the dry weight of the food—what's left when the water is removed. This is the

way nutritionists analyze nutrients content—on a dry matter basis. However, that's not what the law says the pet food company has to put on its label. Consequently, there is very little information to be gleaned from this part of the label, especially since the digestibility of the components listed isn't measured either.

There also must be an ingredient list on each can, bag or package, with the components listed in declining order by amount or volume. The use of cereals and grains helps keep food prices down while still providing important nutrients, but dogs and cats do need some meat or egg protein. Manufacturers will go to great lengths to try to get you to believe their products have more meat in them than they really do. For example, the primary ingredients of a pet food may be wheat, followed by beef. In order to be able to put beef first on a label, a company may simply replace half of the wheat with rice. Thus they can list beef first, followed by those two components that are both similar carbohydrates. Watch for this when you read labels.

Another confusing factor is that some meat products, especially chicken, are very moist—80% or more of chicken meat is actually water. Only 10% or so of cereal grains is usually water. Once the water is removed during processing of the food, the actual amount of chicken in the food drops about 70%. This sends it well down on the ingredient list when the components of the diet are listed on a dry matter basis, as they would be in a scientific analysis, instead of wet or as it's fed to the pet. A company can actually add water to an ingredient to increase its volume and move it further up the list!

There is also a great deal of difference in quality in some ingredients such as chicken by-product meal. If the meal is ground up beaks and feet, the actual nutrient value is very poor. On the other hand, internal organs such as livers, kidneys and hearts that may be contained in by-product meals are great protein sources. Just seeing the words "chicken by-product meal" doesn't tell you a thing about the quality of the ingredient.

Regulations also govern pet food titles. For example, "Beef Dinner" means the food contains a minimum of 25% meat.

A food labeled "beef" or "chicken" must be 95% beef or chicken. These foods, usually canned products, are generally expensive, and are much too high in protein for good health. Animals' nutrient requirements cannot be filled by muscle meat alone. (A wild dog or cat eats a certain amount of lean muscle meat when it kills and eats an animal in the wild. However, it also consumes the bones, intestines and all the other internal organs, thus obtaining many other nutrients than are found in the muscle alone—including calcium and vegetable fiber.)

A "Beef Flavor" product need only have sufficient meat to give a recognizable beef flavor. We're not sure who gets to sample it to see what it tastes like. "Flavor" is usually supplied by sprayed on liquids such as fish meal digest or protein extract. These foods don't have to have beef as part of their actual nutrient content at all.

Many popular foods have bits and kernels of varying color and shape, implying that they have different flavors. In reality, all the pieces are the same basic recipe with a different artificial coating or color in or on each.

Also beware of canned foods containing chunks of what appear to be meat or liver. They're not. They are textured vegetable protein, made out of soy flour and molded and colored to look like meat!

You may also be wondering what the words "complete and balanced" really mean. The NRC and AAFCO define a "complete diet" as one that has everything needed to support life and reproduction without the addition of any nutrients except water. A "balanced diet" contains all of the required nutrients in the proper amount and in the proper proportion to each other.

The difficulty here is that there *is* no one diet appropriate for all life stages. Puppies have very different nutrient requirements than old dogs. Big puppies have different requirements than small puppies. Animals with certain medical problems require specialized diets, just as people do for diseases such as diabetes and coronary artery disease.

Most dog owners, and an increasing number of cat owners, also feed treats to their pets. Treats are rarely "complete and balanced," and are often loaded with salt, fat, artificial colorings and preservatives, all of which comprise "junk food" for animals. Since they aren't labeled as complete and balanced they don't have to conform to any standards or regulations at all, so many are very bad for pets. It wouldn't matter so much if a 100 lb. dog received a few unhealthy treats everyday. Unfortunately, many pets are very small and a few treats per day for a 10 lb. dog amounts to a huge amount of fat and sodium. One "Bonz" treat for a 10 lb. dog has the equivalent amount of fat for the dog as three scoops of ice cream does for an adult person.

Cow hooves are a common cause of fractured teeth in dogs — even large breeds.

A daily vitamin or a few biscuits will not harm your pet unless it has a diet-related disease, but it's best to give these items in moderation. Stick with a crunchy biscuit type of treat for your dog.

Check rawhide treat labels, and stay away from brands not made in the USA. Foreign manufacturers are allowed to use formalin as a preservative in these chews, which is harmful to pets.

Some of them, such as Hill's line of life stage biscuits, are better than others. Read labels before you buy and look for fat and sodium amounts. Also, these biscuits help slow the build up of dental tarter, but they cannot remove tarter once it is present. Your pet will still need dental care even if you feed him this type of snack.

The bottom line is that deceptions exist everywhere and it's difficult to learn how good a food is by reading the label. You certainly will never find out by watching commercials and reading glowing advertisements. The best way to ensure adequate nutrition for your pet is to pick a name brand that is recommended by your vet and that you know has been proven to provide good nutrition to several generations of real, live dogs or cats in actual feeding trails in which that particular food was the only food those animals ate. If you can't tell by reading the label, write to the company, or switch to another name brand. Pick a food, preferably a dry dog or cat chow, that is appropriate for the age and lifestyle of the animal, and stick with it. The most important contribution you can make to your pet's health every day is his or her diet. So choose wisely!

*Second Quarter of 1992 Nielsen Scantrack data from 3000 grocery stores nationwide.