

How to Select Pet Food That's Actually Good For Your Pet



Dogs and cats have biology-driven nutritional requirements that may or may not be satisfied by some pet foods marketed as 'natural.'

According to Susan Nelson, DVM and assistant professor of clinical services at Kansas State University:

"Natural and veggie-based pet foods are based more on market demand from owners, not because they are necessarily better for the pet."

Pet owners should check labels and look for a nutritional adequacy statement from AAFCO -- the Association of American Feed Control Officials. This will insure the formula at least meets minimal nutritional requirements.

Definitions for 'holistic,' 'organic,' and 'natural' pet foods have not been established by AAFCO, so interpretation of what those words mean in terms of formula ingredients is left up to the manufacturer of the product.

Dr. Becker's Comments: As I've discussed in other articles, very little regulation of commercial pet food quality exists in the U.S. Neither the USDA nor the FDA gets involved in what is fed to the majority of companion animals in this country.

And while it's true AAFCO has established minimum nutritional requirements for domesticated dogs and cats, it is not concerned with the quality of ingredients pet food producers put in their formulas. Meeting pets' basic requirements for life and providing optimal, species-appropriate nutrition are two entirely different goals. If you'd like more information on what controls are in place for the manufacture of pet food, you can view [AAFCO's Questions and Answers Concerning Pet Food Regulations](#).

Further, there's nothing to stop manufacturers from producing and selling pet food that doesn't meet the nutritional guidelines AAFCO has established.

Pet Food Marketing Ploys

As Dr. Nelson points out in the article above, many pet food companies that label certain formulas as 'natural' or 'organic' or 'holistic' are hoping pet owners remain blissfully unaware that dogs and cats have different nutritional needs than humans.

And like most manufacturers of prepared foods for both people and pets, they are trying to convince consumers that the contents of their can or bag of dead, processed food is somehow healthier than some other bag of dead, processed food.

The truth is there's nothing you can buy in a can or a bag that is entirely natural, organic or holistic. The stuff is processed, for crying out loud. How can it be 'natural?'

Cashing in on Worried Pet Owners

Because pet food companies realize dog and cat parents are growing more concerned about the quality of food they feed their pets, they are trying to cash in by fiddling with ingredients just enough to introduce 'new' formulas that they claim are somehow more 'natural' than other formulas.

Producers of processed food for both humans and pets have been cashing in on trends like this for decades.

You want your beloved pet to eat a diet closer to what nature intended? They're happy to oblige. They'll switch one preservative with an unpronounceable name for another, slap on a redesigned label featuring the words 'natural' and 'healthy,' and off to market they go.

It's bunk. Please don't be fooled.

It's impossible to feed your pet a biologically appropriate, relatively natural diet from a can or bag unless you're willing to spend a small fortune on grain-free formulas made with true human-grade ingredients.

These brands are less than 10 percent of pet foods available on the market. They are hard to find and well beyond the budget of most pet owners. In fact, if you're buying pet food made with true human-grade ingredients, you should be spending about three times as much as you would for a non-human grade formula.

And even most of the highest quality commercial pet foods still contain additives, preservatives, flavor enhancers and/or extra fats, which hardly qualifies them as holistic, despite clever labeling. After all, they must be able to sit on a shelf for six months to a year after being manufactured, without growing mold.

Species-Appropriate vs. Trendy

'Species-appropriate' isn't something humans relate to in terms of people food. When it comes to our own prepared foods, we're programmed to look for words and phrases like:

- Weight loss
- Low fat
- Whole grain
- Good source of this-or-that
- And of course the hugely popular natural-organic-holistic

When the majority of pet owners see similar words and phrases on commercial pet food labels, they mistakenly assume the formula will be nutritionally appropriate for their dog or cat.

If we could label a healthy, species-appropriate diet for dogs and cats it would look more like this:

- High in high-quality protein (muscle meat, not pieces and parts)
- Moderate levels of animal fat

- High levels of EPA/DHA
- High moisture content (prey is 70 percent water)
- A few fresh cut veggies and a bit of fruit (to mimic stomach contents of prey)
- No grains (carnivores don't have a biologic requirement for grain)
- No wads of potatoes or other starches to offset meat content

Not terribly glamorous or trendy, is it? I wonder how many pet owners would buy our pet food.

Probably not many – and pet food marketers know it.

Shop Smart

You can start today to improve your pet's diet by simply ignoring the labeling claims on commercial pet food. Look instead for AAFCO certification to make sure it meets the basic requirements for vitamins and trace minerals, and learn all you can about how to read ingredient lists like a pro.

As a general rule, the longer the ingredient list, the more potential for filling your pet full of stuff that is biologically inappropriate, probably allergenic, and possibly toxic.

What to look for in a dry pet food:

- Meat, more meat, and did I mention meat? Cats and dogs are carnivores – they thrive on a diet based on meat. They have no evolved need for carbohydrates. Grains (carbs) are added to pet food because 1) they're cheaper than meat, and 2) they hold the kibbled bits together. They aren't added for the sake of proper nutrition for your meat-eating pet.

The source and quality of protein in the formula is crucially important for your pet's health. Look for whole food sources at the very top of the ingredient list like 'beef,' 'turkey,' 'lamb' or 'chicken' -- one-word descriptions.

Meat and fat ingredients should be identified by species (turkey, lamb, beef, fish, etc.). Avoid any formula that uses unidentified sources, described non-specifically as 'meat,' 'animal' or 'poultry.'

- The next ingredient of better quality foods will probably be a meat source followed by the word 'meal.' Meat meal (with the meat source identified, as in 'chicken meal' or 'turkey meal') is considered a relatively high-quality protein source by processed pet food standards.
- Ingredients three and four should be vegetables (avoid corn, wheat or beep pulp) and unless the formula is grain-free (which I recommend), a whole grain source like brown rice. Organic grains are preferable where grains are included, but they are no substitute for meat content. Avoid formulas with 'grain fragments' -- these are non-nutritive fillers. Grain-free formulas will frequently use potatoes as the starch, which holds the food together during processing.

Whole fruits as a portion of ingredients three and four are fine -- especially if they replace grains.

- Leave all pet food containing corn or soy in any form on the shelf. Corn is a cheap filler ingredient, non-nutritious for pets, and a known allergenic. Soy is estrogenic and wreaks havoc on your pet's endocrine system.
- Also walk away from formulas containing by-products, especially those that don't specify the type of meat in the meat by-product. Believe it or not, meat by-products – especially those not specified as a certain kind of meat – will contain parts of beaks, feathers, feet, hooves, hair and even tumors that have been ground into the mix during processing. Although some by-products

may provide some nutrition, such as spleens and other organ meats, because they are all lumped together it's best to avoid them.

- Avoid pet foods containing artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners and preservatives, especially those known to be carcinogens. In dog food, these usually go by the names BHT, BHA, ethoxyquin and propyl gallate. When considering foods containing fish, look for manufacturer assurance on the label that states the formula contains NO artificial preservatives. Look for foods preserved with vitamins E and C, often called tocopherols.
- It's important to note that on pet food labels, ingredients are listed by weight. Because meat is inclusive of water, it is heavy, so it can be listed first on the label. When the water is removed from meat (which happens when a kibbled or dry food is produced) the meat is reduced in weight by roughly 80 percent, meaning the bulk of the food is probably coming from ingredients two, three and four – yet the meat will appear on the label as the first ingredient.

In addition, it's also important to be aware of a labeling practice known as 'splitting.' Splitting occurs when different components of the same ingredient are listed separately on the label to improve the look of the ingredient list.

If, for example, rice makes up 50 percent of a formula and meat only 25 percent, it's possible to list the rice as three or four individual ingredients all under 25 percent each, for example, brown rice, white rice, rice bran, and rice gluten meal. Listing the ingredient 'rice' in this manner allows the manufacturer to list the meat -- at 25 percent -- as the first ingredient.

It can be confusing to figure out the relative quality of a pet food you're thinking of purchasing, and in many ways, it's intended to confuse. But with practice, you can become expert at reading labels and understanding the nutritional value of the food you feed your pet.



Information provided at: <http://healthypets.mercola.com/sites/healthypets/archive/2010/10/21/selecting-the-best-cat-pet-and-dog-pet-food.aspx>



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