



Be a label detective

How to read and understand pet food labels



BY KIM BLOOMER AND JEANNIE THOMASON

“Chicken by-product meal... wheat gluten...preserved with BHA/BHT...” If you’ve ever taken a close look at the list of ingredients on a commercial pet food package, you’ve probably found yourself wondering what all these things really are. If you’re seriously concerned about good nutrition for your dog or cat, however, you need to learn how to read and interpret pet food labels.

Ingredients 101

Pet food manufacturers are required to list all the ingredients in their products. Each ingredient must be listed in order of its weight. This is one of the better ways to determine the actual quality of the food. With a little knowledge of the ingredients themselves, you can then choose a food that is more appropriate, more digestible and free of unwanted products.

1. Grains

Dogs and cats are carnivores and need raw meat and bones. They weren’t meant to eat a grain-based diet, yet many commercial pet foods have a high content of grains and grain products.

The most common include:

- barley
- brown rice
- corn



- corn bran
- corn gluten
- corn gluten meal
- ground corn
- corn syrup
- ground dehulled oats
- ground wheat
- ground whole brown rice
- ground whole wheat
- ground yellow corn
- kibbled corn
- soybean meal
- wheat bran
- wheat flour
- wheat germ meal
- wheat gluten.

Choosing a product with the smallest possible quantity of grains will help prevent eventual health problems.

Hint

Be aware of the tactics used by commercial manufacturers to disguise less desirable ingredients. For example, if you were to group together all the wheat ingredients on a pet food label, the wheat would be the primary ingredient, not the chicken touted on the package.

2. By-products



Meat by-products are refuse or leftovers from the human food industry. They include parts of the animal not

used for human consumption, such as heads, feet, bones, blood, intestines, lungs, spleens, livers, ligaments, and fat trimmings. Even unborn baby animals are considered a by-product.

None of these ingredients in themselves are bad for a carnivorous animal – after all, wild dogs and cats eat them when they consume their prey – but the condition of the by-products that go into pet food is questionable. They can often be diseased or spoiled, for instance.

3. Meat meal, poultry meal, animal digest



These are very common ingredients in most packaged pet foods. “Meal” could be translated as rendered-down “food”. It’s made by boiling down leftover parts from carcasses to remove or separate fats, take out the water and so on. The idea is to kill any bacteria, viruses, and parasites to make the food “safe” for consumption.

Hint

Dead, dying, diseased and disabled (known as 4-D) animal protein sources are banned in human food, but can still be legally used for pet food.

The problem is, the rendering process is done at such high temperatures (270°F/130°C) that the valuable enzymes and proteins in the raw ingredients are also “rendered” useless, or destroyed. These enzymes and proteins are critical to good health.

4. Vegetable protein and gluten



Think “glue” when you read “gluten”. In pet food, gluten is used to hold dry kibbles together, and is also added to canned foods.

Soybean meal protein is another newly favored ingredient in commercial pet foods. Original pet foods had a lot more meat in them, but thanks to the demand for bigger profits, grains, vegetable proteins and other cheap ingredients have replaced the high meat content in most commercial pet foods. The result? Severe nutritional deficiencies.

5. Preservatives and other additives

These ingredients are in all commercial pet foods, although the canned diets are a bit better than the dry foods.

Because pet foods have been highly overcooked and are now denatured, something has to be added back in to improve their taste and appearance. They must also have preservatives to lengthen their shelf life for the retailer and buyer. While many of these ingredients fall under the GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe) guidelines, this doesn’t necessarily mean they are good for our pets.

Ingredients to watch out for are butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA), butylated hy-



droxytoluene (BHT), and ethoxyquin. All are synthetic preservatives and potentially cancer-causing. Another red flag additive is propylene glycol (also used as a less toxic version of automotive antifreeze). This ingredient lends a sweet taste to the food and is used for flavor enhancing, but it’s not something that should be part of a dog or cat’s daily diet.

What is AAFCO and what does it do?

AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) develops guidelines for the production, labeling, and sale of animal foods. They have developed two standards they feel pet foods should meet. All pet foods which meet AAFCO requirements must include one of two statements on their labels:

1. “Formulated to meet AAFCO’s nutrient requirement.” This standard simply means the food was tested in the laboratory and was found to have the “recommended” quantities of protein, fat, etc.



2. “Animal-feeding tests using AAFCO’s procedures substantiate that this product provides complete and balanced nutrition.” For a pet food to carry this label, it has to be tested on a population of animals for six months and shown to provide adequate (not optimal) nutrition.

Here’s the catch. If one particular product in a manufacturer’s line is tested and found to meet this standard, the company is now allowed to include the same statement on other products in the same “family” that provide equal or greater concentrations of all the

nutrients. So even if the pet food carries this statement on its label, you cannot be sure that the specific product was actually tested in a food trial. In any case, testing a food for six months is not a long enough to determine if deficiencies or other adverse effects may occur long term.

Hint

Dogs and cats do not require a lot of carbohydrates – something typically found and allowed in high quantities by AAFCO standards.

How does an AAFCO feeding trial work?

Before the trial starts, and after it ends, the participating animals must pass a veterinary examination. The veterinarian evaluates general health, body and hair coat condition. At the end (but not the beginning) of the trial, only four blood values are measured and recorded: hemoglobin, packed cell volume, serum alkaline phosphatase, and serum albumin. The trials do not take into consideration that different breeds have different needs, nor do they differentiate between breed sizes (e.g., from a nutritional standpoint, large breeds are still puppies up to two years of age).



Rules for the feeding trial are very loose. The food being tested must merely keep six out of eight seemingly healthy dogs/cats (two are allowed to drop out) alive for six months, without their losing more than 15% of their initial body weight, and without the average of the four blood values falling below minimum levels. Yet most nutritional deficiencies or excesses will not be

apparent within a six-month period, as they tend to take much longer to develop.

It's clear that the protocol for AAFCO feeding trials and the standards by which pet food is made are not perfect. Indeed, these standards can lull us into a false sense of security about the food we are giving our pets.

Many AAFCO officials have close ties to the pet food industry, which is like the fox guarding the henhouse. It's important to realize that AAFCO is an association, not a government agency, which means the pet food industry is self-regulating.

Is it really “complete and balanced”?



AAFCO states that a pet food must contain what they have declared to be the minimum requirements of each ingredient or nutrient. This means that any pet food company can claim “complete and balanced” if their food meets the standard based on these set amounts, and not the actual requirements of the various animals that will eat the food.

Hint

“Natural” is not the same as “organic.” The term “organic” refers to the conditions under which feed animals and plants are raised.

The concept of “complete and balanced” is really only a myth. It's actually a marketing concept rather than science. For example, a box of cereal may state “complete and balanced”. That doesn't mean for every single

meal, but just for one bowl of cereal. You wouldn't want to have to eat that same bowl of cereal every meal for the rest of your life because it wouldn't give your body all the nutrients it needs. The same holds true for our pets.

The standards for “balanced” pet food are approximated. True balance comes with giving dogs and cats a variety of foods, such as animals eat in the wild. The needs of our dogs and cats are the same as those of their wild cousins.

What is “natural”?



The term “natural” does not have an official definition, although you will often see it on commercial pet food packages these days. For the most part, “natural” can be construed as meaning that the product lacks artificial flavors, colors or preservatives. Be discerning when reading about AAFCO standards and ingredients allowable in pet foods, especially the word “natural” – arsenic is natural.

AAFCO standards irrelevant to raw diets



The AAFCO standards were based on the belief that dogs are omnivores and can be properly maintained on a grain-based diet. They are therefore irrelevant to raw diets. If a dog is fed as an omnivore, most of the nutrients

in processed food are unavailable to him because they are contained in the indigestible plant matter. AAFCO standards are based on cooked or processed foods which already have a decreased nutritional value since cooking denatures proteins and collagen, destroys important nutrients, and generally makes the food less digestible and less bio-available (the exception being grains and vegetables, which we have already determined should not be given to dogs anyway).

These “complete and balanced” pet foods can actually destroy long-term health and cause disease, yet still be marketed as a healthy food for your pet. An example would be the lamb and rice commercial diets that “met or exceeded” the nutrient profiles of AAFCO and passed their feeding protocol, but created a taurine deficiency in the dogs that ate them.*

You have a right to know what you are feeding your dog or cat. That means being proactive in knowing what your animal needs to thrive. If you do your


homework, and learn how to read labels before buying a food, you can ensure your best friend receives the nutritional care he deserves.

Hint

In nature, carnivores thrive on fresh, raw prey. Their diets offer the exact proportion of fat, protein, vitamins, minerals, enzymes, etc. they need. If wild animals suffer a nutritional deficiency, it's not because the food is insufficient but because they just aren't getting enough to eat.

*Torres, C.L.; Backus, R.C.; Fascetti, A.J.; and Rogers, Q.R. “Taurine status in normal dogs fed a commercial diet associated with taurine deficiency and dilated cardiomyopathy.” *Journal of Animal Physiology and Animal Nutrition*, 87, 2003. pp. 359-372.

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