

Important Nutrition Facts and Myths

Written by Dr. John Burk

1. There is much misinformation about nutrition circulating around the internet, other forms of advertising, and pet stores, therefore, as your veterinarian, we want you to have accurate, scientific, and factual information on what is the best nutrition for your pet. Below is some important information to consider when purchasing a pet food for your family pet.
 - **Grains, such as corn and wheat, are not fillers.** A filler is “an ingredient that provides no nutritional value.” Corn and other grains are actually highly nutritional and digestible. For example, corn is a good source of vegetable protein and has many essential amino acids (except Lysine) and is a good source of the essential fatty acid, Linoleic Acid. Corn is over 95% digestible.
 - **Grain free diets** often have higher calorie counts due to higher fat content.
 - **Allergies to grain** (corn, wheat, etc.) can occur in both dogs and cats, but this is quite uncommon.
 - **Meat by-products are actually quite nutritious.** Example of by-products include lungs, spleen, kidneys, brain, livers, blood, stomach, intestines (free of any material), chicken feet, and chicken necks. By-products do not include feathers, feces, hair, horns, teeth, etc. as many people claim. By-products are all edible parts of the animals, and are a source of high quality protein. In fact, many by-products are actually higher quality protein and more digestible than striated muscle (meat).
 - **Chicken meal or other meat meals is just chicken** (or the other listed meat), without water, then ground or reduced in particle size. Chicken by-product meal or other by-product meals are just the meals, without water, that has been ground up or reduced in particle size. Therefore, they are just as nutritious as the meat or the by-product. However, if the pet food label just says “meat meal” or “meat and bone meal” without specifying the actual meat, then it is best to avoid that pet food.
 - **Pet foods with a combination of protein sources** usually have higher levels of amino acids than pet foods with single protein diets so make sure single protein diets are adequately balanced and have all the necessary amino acids.
 - ***What is an all-natural diet?*** It is a diet that has no artificial or chemically synthesized ingredients or additives. However, there is no pet food that fits this category. All pet foods have some degree of artificial or chemically synthesized ingredients. Examples of these are vitamins, minerals, and other trace nutrients that need to/should be added to properly balance the pet food. Similarly, there is no pet food that is 100% organic.

- **What is a holistic pet food?** There is no official definition for a holistic pet food. It is something that is made up by the manufacturers and is an advertising ploy.
- **Why preservatives?** Preservatives are a good thing and keep the pet food from spoiling within days of opening the food and having long shelf lives. There are both natural preservatives (Vitamin E, Vitamin C, Rosemary extract), and artificial preservatives (BHT, BHA). There is no known health benefit of natural preservatives over artificial preservatives.
- **Omega 3 fatty acids** provide many health benefits to your pet, but not all sources of omega 3 fatty acids (EPA and DHA) are created equal. Flax seed oil, olive oil, etc. are great for people but dogs and cats do not adequately convert these ingredients to EPA or DHA. Stick to marine based fish oil sources (i.e. salmon, mackerel, tuna, herring, etc.) for your pets.
- **“Raw” diets.** There are some very important things to consider if you want to feed a “raw” diet to your pet. There is absolutely no scientific evidence that supports raw diets being superior over commercial diets.
 - It has been proven that raw diets are a much greater source of food poisoning to both the pet and family members. One recent study showed 80% of raw diets had Salmonella isolated from them, and 30% of stool samples from dogs fed a raw diet had Salmonella isolated from their feces. The Salmonella is a source of infection to everyone in the household.
 - There are many other different kinds of bacteria and parasites that can be found in raw diets if they are not cooked properly.
 - The FDA strongly discourages feeding “raw” diets to pets because of the public health risk.
- **Things to avoid in pet food:** All-life stage diets, high protein diets, “raw” diets (unless discussed with your veterinarian), grain-free diets (unless recommended by your veterinarian), meat and bone meal listed in the ingredients without specifying the meat source, non-marine source omega 3 fatty acids.

2). **What are the best food options available for your pet?** The above information is a good starting point for choosing among the many options available. In addition, there are other important things to consider about the quality of the pet food you are choosing.

- **All pet food must meet AAFCO requirements.** AAFCO stands for Association of American Feed Control Officials.
- **What does AAFCO do?**
 - Define feed analysis recommendations such as protein, fat, and fiber percentages.
 - Define ingredients acceptable for pet food.
 - Standardize feeding trials.

- They do not authorize, certify, test, or otherwise approve animal feed.
- They have no control over websites or other advertising, only the packaging.
- **The FDA requires** all pet foods to be safe to eat, produced under sanitary conditions, contain no harmful substances, and be truthfully labeled.
- **All pet foods** must meet AAFCO and FCA requirements, but these are only the minimum requirements, and ideally a good quality pet food will go well beyond these expectations.
- **Here are some important questions to ask about your pet food company:**
 - Does the company employ veterinarians who are board certified nutritionists to ensure the best possible food and care of the animals involved in the feeding trials?
 - Does the company perform extensive food trials on all of their foods to ensure digestibility and bioavailability of the nutrients in the pet food?
 - Does the company have thorough and exhaustive quality control programs in place? Is each batch of food tested?
 - Does the company conduct research to constantly provide the best and up to date nutrition, especially for pets with diseases that require specific nutrition?
 - Does the pet food company work closely with veterinarians outside their company?
 - Can you visit their facility?

3). Given the above information, the following foods brands are ones that we recommend: Hill's (Science Diet,) Royal Canin, Eukanuba, and Iams.