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Companion Animal Nutrition: A Survey of Veterinarians

Summary

In the spring of 1998, a survey of attitudes toward companion animal nutrition and commercial pet food was mailed to 700 veterinarian and veterinary student members of the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights. One hundred fifty responses were received and tabulated. Respondents felt that obesity, inflammatory bowel disease, and developmental bone disease in dogs, and obesity, inflammatory bowel disease, and lower urinary tract disease in cats were the health problems most influenced by nutrition. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they advise their clients about feeding healthy animals, and a similar percent said that they sell dog/eat food. According to the veterinarians, brands of commercial (nonprescription) food are chosen based on quality of ingredients, experience, availability, palatability, cost, company support, and feeding trials. When asked whether they believe that a qualitative difference exists among commercial pet food brands, 65% answered "definitely yes," and 68% said they didn't think pet food companies provide adequate information about their products. The respondents said they wanted standardized labeling and more information about meat and grain quality and source, digestibility, nutritional profile, byproduct source, feeding recommendations, and preservatives. Greater than 90% of the respondents said that they have concerns about commercial pet food. Those concerns included poor quality of meats/fats/grains, preservatives, additives, misleading claims, 4-13 protein source, byproduct source, inadequate information, over-processing, contaminants, inconsistent ingredients, and excess protein/fat. Approximately one-third indicated they frequently recommend home-cooking in the treatment of health problems, while 20% frequently recommend home-cooking for healthy dogs and cats. Due to a low response rate to the survey (21.4%), the possibility of bias exists, and the results can not be generalized to all members of the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights.

Companion Animal Nutrition: A Survey of Veterinarians

1. Please comment on health problems that you think are influenced by nutrition by filling in the following chart. (Though some of the following represent constellations of diseases, respond according to your general experience and practice decisions):

Health Problem DOGS	Degree of Influence (0=None to 5=Primary)	Is Nutrition Part of Therapy? (Yes/No)
Dental Disease	Mean = 3.2	87% Yes
Inflammatory Bowel Disease	Mean = 3.7	99.3% Yes
Hypothyroidism	Mean = 1.3	43.1% Yes
Chronic Renal Failure	Mean = 3.1	99.3% Yes
Cancer	Mean = 2.3	80.0% Yes

Cardiovascular Disease	Mean = 2.5	94.5% Yes
Diabetes Mellitus	Mean = 3.1	98.6% Yes
Hip Dysplasia	Mean = 2.4	72.6% Yes
Developmental Bone Disease	Mean = 3.3	92.7% Yes
Gastric Dilatation Volvulus	Mean = 2.7	79.4% Yes
Obesity	Mean = 4.6	100.0% Yes

Health Problems CATS	Degree of Influence (0=None to 5=Primary)	Is Nutrition Part of Therapy? (Yes/No)
Dental Disease	Mean = 3.3	85.8% Yes
Inflammatory Bowel Disease	Mean = 3.9	97.3% Yes
Hyperthyroidism	Mean = 1.5	46.9% Yes
Chronic Renal Failure	Mean = 3.1	99.3% Yes
Cancer	Mean = 2.3	78.9% Yes
Cardiovascular Disease	Mean = 2.6	85.7% Yes
Diabetes Mellitus	Mean = 3.6	98.6% Yes
Liver Disease	Mean = 3.2	93.9% Yes
Chronic Vomiting/Diarrhea	Mean = 3.6	99.3% Yes
Lower Urinary Tract Disease	Mean = 3.8	99.3% Yes
Obesity	Mean = 4.6	100.0% Yes

2. Are there other health problems in which nutrition plays a role in either etiology or therapy?

Chronic skin disease (45.9%)
 Allergic disease (29.6%)
 Pancreatitis (14.3%)
 All health problems (13.3%)
 Behavior problems (12.2%)
 Immune disease (6.1%)
 Bladder stones (6.1%)
 Skeletal disease (5.1%)
 (Multiple responses; does not equal 100.0%)

3. How would you rate your clients' interest in what to feed healthy animals?

49.7% very interested
 46.9% somewhat interested
 3.4% not interested

4. How often do you advise your clients about feeding healthy animals?

79.6% frequently
 17.0% occasionally
 3.4% seldom

0% never

5. How often do you use nutritional supplements (nutraceuticals)?

38.5% frequently
42.7% occasionally
15.4% seldom
3.5% never

6. How often do you use prescription diets for certain health problems?

74.3% frequently
20.1% occasionally
1.4% seldom
4.2% never

7. If yes, what brands?

Hills
Iams/Eukanuba
Purina CNM
IVD (Select Care/Choice)
Waltham
(Top five brands)

8. Why have you chosen those particular brands?

Availability (20.8%)
Quality (14.6%)
Prescription diets (13.8%)
Research/feeding trials (11.5%)
Ingredients (11.5%)
Choice made by others (10.0%)
Experience (9.2%)
Effectiveness (9.2%)
Palatability (7.7%)
Product reputation (7.7%)
(Multiple responses; does not equal 100.0%)

9. Do you sell dog/catfood?

76.6% yes
23.4% no

10. If yes, what brands?

Hills Science Diet
Iams/Eukanuba
Waltham
Purina
IVD (Select Care/Choice)
(Top five brands)

11. Why have you chosen those particular brands?

Quality of ingredients (26.3%)
Choice made by others (16.8%)
Experience (15.8%)
Availability (11.6%)
Palatability (10.5%)
Cost/price (9.5%)
Company support (8.4%)
Research/feeding trials (8.4%)
(Multiple responses; does not equal 100.0%)

12. How often do you recommend commercial pet food that you do not sell?

63.3% frequently
25.9% occasionally
8.6% seldom
2.2% never

13. Do you believe a qualitative difference exists among commercial pet food brands?

65.3% definitely yes
25.9% probably yes
4.8% probably no
0.7 % definitely no

14. Do you believe that pet food companies provide adequate information about their products?

31.9% yes
68.1% no

15. If no, what additional information would be helpful?

Meat/grain quality & source (50.6%)
Standardized labeling (25.9%)
Digestibility (15.3%)
Nutritional profile (14.1%)
Byproduct information (7.1%)
Feeding recommendations (7.1%)
Preservatives (4.7%)
(Multiple responses; does not equal 100.0%)

16. Do you have concerns about commercial pet foods?

90.8% yes
9.2% no

17. If yes, briefly describe those concerns:

Poor quality meat/fat/grains (42.0%)
Preservatives (17.6%)
Additives (17.6%)
Misleading claims (12.6%)
4-D protein sources (10.9%)
Byproducts (10.9%)

Inadequate information (9.2%)
Over-processing (7.6%)
Contaminants (5.9%)
Cause of disease (5.9%)
Inconsistent ingredients (5.0%)
Excess protein/fat (5.0%)
Generic pet food (5.0%)
(Multiple responses; does not equal 100.0%)

18. How often do you recommend home-cooking for healthy dogs?

20.5% frequently
18.5% occasionally
26.7% seldom
34.2% never

19. How often do you recommend home-cooking for healthy cats?

20.4% frequently
14.8% occasionally
28.2% seldom
36.6% never

20. How often do you recommend home-cooking in the treatment of health problems?

32.2% frequently
46.6% occasionally
19.2% seldom
2.1% never

21. What do you feed your own companion animals?

Hills Science
Iams/Eukanuba
Homemade
IVD (Select Care/Choice)
Nutro
(Top five brands)

Background Information

22. What year did you receive, or will you receive, your degree in veterinary medicine?

2000+ (2.7%)
1990-99 (38.8%)
1980-89 (36.7%)
1970-79 (12.9%)
1960-1969 (6.8%)
before 1960 (2.0%)

23. Have you received any education in veterinary nutrition?

90.5% yes
9.5% no

24. If yes, from what source?

82.1% veterinary school
52.4% continuing education
14.5% other (name: _____)
(Multiple responses; does not equal 100.0%)

25. From which veterinary school did you graduate?

UC-Davis
Cornell
U of PA
Abroad
Colorado State
(Top five schools)

26. What is your practice type?

88.3% small animal-gen'l
2.0% sm animal-dog
4.1% sm animal-cat
5.5% sm/large animal

27. How would you characterize your practice?

54.1% traditional allopathic
11.5% specialty
1.4% alternative
10.8% holistic
22.3% combination

28. Additional comments:

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Question 1. Please comment on health problems that you think are influenced by nutrition by filling in the following chart.

Health Problem	Degree of Influence (0=None to 5=Primary)	Is Nutrition Part of Therapy? (Yes/No)	N
DOGS			
Dental Disease	0-0, 1-8, 2-20, 3-61, 4-43, 5-14	y-127, n-19	146
Inflammatory Bowel	0-1, 1-1, 2-7, 3-27, 4-60, 5-39	y-144, n-1	145
Hypothyroidism	0-54, 1-34, 2-24, 3-19, 4-10, 5-3	y-62, n-82	144
Chronic Renal Failure	0-5, 1-34, 2-27, 3-29, 4-50, 5-19	y-145, n-1	146

Cancer	0-18, 1-30, 2-30, 3-36, 4-18, 5-13	y-116, n-29	145
Cardiovascular Disease	0-10, 1-22, 2-32, 3-53, 4-21, 5-8	y-138, n-8	146
Diabetes Mellitus	0-4, 1-10, 2-20, 3-42, 4-45, 5-25	y-144, n-2	146
Hip Dysplasia	0-13, 1-27, 2-29, 3-51, 4-22, 5-4	y-106, n-40	146
Developmental Bone Dis	0-4, 1-7, 2-18, 3-51, 4-46, 5-20	y-135, n-11	146
Gastric Dilatation Volvulus	0-12, 1-19, 2-30, 3-33, 4-39, 5-13	y-116, n-30	146
Obesity	0-0, 1-1, 2-0, 3-6, 4-42, 5-97	y-146, n-0	146

Health Problems CATS	Degree of Influence (0=None to 5=Primary)	Is Nutrition Part of Therapy? (Yes/No)	N
Dental Disease	0-1, 1-9, 2-21, 3-54, 4-45, 5-18	y-127, n-21	148
Inflammatory Bowel	0-0, 1-3, 2-6, 3-34, 4-66, 5-37	y-145, n-1	146
Hyperthyroidism	0-56, 1-25, 2-24, 3-24, 4-14, 5-4	y-69, n-78	147
Chronic Renal Failure	0-5, 1-14, 2-25, 3-38, 4-43, 5-22	y-146, n-1	147
Cancer	0-19, 1-27, 2-34, 3-36, 4-17, 5-14	y-116, n-31	147
Cardiovascular Disease	0-12, 1-31, 2-30, 3-43, 4-26, 5-5	y-126, n-21	147
Diabetes Mellitus	0-1, 1-6, 2-22, 3-44, 4-49, 5-25	y-145, n-2	147
Liver Disease	0-7, 1-6, 2-22, 3-52, 4-40, 5-20	y-138, n-9	147
Chronic Vomiting	0-1, 1-3, 2-11, 3-49, 4-51, 5-31	y-145, n-1	146
Lower Urinary Tract Dis	0-0, 1-5, 2-5, 3-35, 4-68, 5-33	y-145, n-1	146
Obesity	0-0, 1-0, 2-4, 3-4, 4-40, 5-98	y-146, n-0	146

Question 2. Are there other health problems in which nutrition plays a role in either etiology or therapy?

N = 98

Chronic skin disease - 45

Allergic disease - 29

Pancreatitis - 14

All health matters - 13

Behavior problems - 12

Immune mediated disease - 6

Bladder stones - 6

Skeletal disease - 5

Also mentioned - Ocular disease, reproductive problems, epilepsy, anemia, lipid disorders, ear disease, neonatal health

(Multiple responses)

Question 3. How would you rate your clients' interest in what to feed *healthy* animals?

N = 147

Very interested - 73

Somewhat interested - 69

Not interested - 5

Question 4. How often do you advise your clients about feeding *healthy* animals?

N = 147

Frequently - 117

Occasionally - 25

Seldom - 5

Never - 0

Question 5. How often do you use nutritional supplements (nutraceuticals)?

N = 143

Frequently - 55

Occasionally - 61

Seldom - 22

Never - 5

Question 6. How often do you use prescription diets for certain health problems?

N = 144

Frequently - 107

Occasionally - 29

Seldom - 2

Never - 6

Question 7. If yes, what brands?

Hills Science - 121

Iams/Eukanuba - 58

Purina CNM - 57

IVD (Select Care/Choice) - 41

Waltham - 17

(Top five responses)

Question 8. Why have you chosen those particular brands?

N = 130

Availability - 27

Quality - 19

Prescription diets - 18

Research/feeding trials - 15

Ingredients - 15

Others made choice - 13
Experience - 12
Effectiveness- 12
Palatability - 10
Product reputation - 10
(Multiple responses)

Question 9. Do you sell dog/cat food?

N = 141
Yes - 108
No - 33

Question 10. If yes, what brands?

Hills Science - 65
Iams/Eukanuba - 35
Waltham - 16
Purina - 12
IVD (Select Care/Choice) - 9
(Multiple responses)

Question 11. Why have you chosen those particular brands?

N = 95
Quality of ingredients - 25
Choice made by others - 16
Effectiveness/experience - 15
Availability - 11
Palatability - 10
Cost/price - 9
Company support - 8
Research- 8
Also mentioned - Therapeutic effect, prescription diets, no by-products, completeness of product line, recommended by colleagues, few or no additives/preservatives, advertising.
(Multiple responses)

Question 12. How often do you recommend commercial pet food that you do not sell?

N = 139
Frequently - 88
Occasionally - 36
Seldom- 12
Never - 3

Question 13. Do you believe a qualitative difference exists among commercial pet food brands?

N = 147
Definitely yes - 96
Probably yes - 43
Probably no - 7
Definitely no - 1

Question 14. Do you believe that pet food companies provide adequate information about their products?

N = 141

Yes - 45

No - 96

Question 15. If you answered no to #14, what additional information would be helpful?

N = 85

Meat/grain quality and source - 30

Standardized labeling - 22

Quality of ingredients - 13

Digestibility- 13

By-product information - 6

Real feeding recommendations - 6

Preservatives - 4

Feeding trial information - 4

Health risks/problems - 4

Also mentioned - Contaminants, additives, formulation changes, calories, trace vitamins and minerals, comparison information, truth
(Multiple responses)

Question 16. Do you have concerns about commercial pet foods?

N = 142

Yes - 129

No - 13

Question 17. If yes, briefly describe your concerns about commercial pet foods.

N = 119

Poor quality meat/fats/grains - 50

Preservatives - 21

Additives - 21

Misleading claims - 15

4-D protein sources - 13

By-products - 13

Inadequate information - 11

Over-processing - 9

Contaminants - 7

Cause of disease - 7

Inconsistent ingredients - 6

Excess protein/fat - 6

Genetic pet food - 6

Also mentioned - rendered/euthanized/roadkill, carcinogenic additives, quality control, inadequate nutrition, expiration dating
(Multiple responses)

Select comments:

- If ingredients are not fit for human consumption, then how can they be good for our pets?

- If I had more time, I would prepare fresh food for all my pets!
- Changes are often made without consumer input for economic reasons
- Basically, it seems that "you pay for what you get"!
- Can you get adequate nutrition from a bag? I don't think so, animals need whole foods
- "Garbage in, garbage out"
- I am most concerned with the irresponsible marketing of lamb & rice diets which were originally intended for food allergy rescue
- Too many owners get confused; generic or low cost foods are often composed of inappropriate ingredient proportions
- Like commercial people food, I think consumers trust a product will not be deleterious to their health - and so many of them are
- Many marketers will supply anything consumers want - hypoallergenic options such as lamb & rice are now misused to the point that they cannot be used as elimination diets
- Popularity of natural diets often seems to be marketed along with "pseudoscience"
- Having read multiple articles on nutrition and realizing there is almost no way to comparison shop with different brands, my greatest concern is that neither a veterinarian or layman can make informed, qualitative choices
- "Light" does not necessarily mean lower calories
- Overall, our pets seem to live long, healthy lives on any of the brands out there
- Somebody should regulate and make standards about "excess" and "lack of" nutrition
- Using dead, diseased and dying animals for pet consumption when they are unfit for human consumption
- Clinical experience tells me that many medical problems are caused by commercial diets
- The public feels that commercial food is all animals need to meet nutritional requirements
- Some commercial diets are "junk" food for animals and should never be used as a basic diet
- Meat labeled "unfit for human consumption" is the primary source of protein for dog food
- The incredibly poor quality of commercial pet foods is largely responsible for the continued increase in chronic and degenerative diseases in dogs & cats
- Cancer and hypothyroidism are caused by the food we feed

Question 18. How often do you recommend home-cooking for *healthy* dogs?

N = 146

Frequently - 30

Occasionally - 27

Seldom - 39

Never - 50

Question 19. How often do you recommend home-cooking for *healthy* cats?

N = 142

Frequently - 29

Occasionally - 21

Seldom - 40

Never - 52

Question 20. How often do you recommend home-cooking in the treatment of

health problems?

N = 146
Frequently - 47
Occasionally - 68
Seldom - 28
Never - 3

Question 21. What do you feed your own companion animals?

Hills Science - 69
Iams/Eukanuba - 43
Homemade - 34
IVD (Select Care/Choice) - 8
Nutro - 7
(Multiple responses)

Question 22. What year did you receive, or will you receive, your degree in veterinary medicine?

N = 147
2000+ - 4
1990-1999 - 57
1980-1989 - 54
1970-1979 - 19
1960-1969 - 10
Before 1960 - 3

Question 23. Have you received any education in veterinary nutrition?

N = 147
Yes - 133
No - 14

Question 24. If yes, from what source?

N = 145
Vet school - 119
Continuing education - 76
Other - 21

Question 25. From which veterinary school did you graduate?

University of California-Davis - 21
Cornell - 20
University of Pennsylvania - 11
Abroad - 10
Colorado State University - 9
(Top five responses)

Question 26. What is your practice type?

N = 145
Small animal-general - 128
Small animal-dog - 3

Small animal-cat - 6

Small/large animal - 8

Question 27. How would you characterize your practice?

N = 145

Traditional allopathic - 80

Specialty - 17

Alternative - 2

Holistic - 16

Combination - 33

Question 28. Additional comments.

Select comments:

- I have salvaged many dogs and cats from major organ diseases with veggie diets, supplements, and egg products
- The meat put in dog and cat food is most often not fit for human consumption
- Any efforts to improve the quality of food fed to our companion animals are greatly appreciated. I also feel that it is important to uncover the fraud and false nutritional claims of the pet food industry
- I think that it is long overdue that pet food companies are investigated for the ingredients placed in pet food
- Most pet owners are not aware of what goes into their pet's food
- The movement to fresh, whole foods has been growing for many years and, as always, the veterinarians are the last to catch on. We should be embarrassed that our clients know more about nutrition than we do!
- Nutrition is the future and the only hope for preventing and curing disease
- It is as hard to get accurate information about pet foods as it is about human foods because of the less than honest advertising
- Nutrition is the most overlooked and probably the most important aspect of all medicine
- I would like to see a trend toward the production and usage of less processed veterinary diets. I promote primarily vegetarian diets for dogs
- I recommend vegetarian diets when feasible to avoid diseased carcasses and prevent slaughterhouse profits
- I feel it is imperative we have more nutrition offered to us. I am very confused with all the products out there
- I would prefer if the animal protein given to cats and dogs would be obtained from animals that have led healthy, natural lives with a minimum amount of stress and suffering
- Home cooked diets scare me a little because of owner compliance and the adequacy of the diet. I prefer using a diet that I know has been tested via feeding trials
- Many animals I see do not tolerate home cooked diets, and some have subtle micro-nutrient deficiencies
- Nutrition is a very fundamental part of a wellness program
- Vegetarian diets work well in dogs, but I don't recommend them for cats
- If the American public knew what went into commercial food, you'd see some major changes in purchasing choices
- I use API's handout in educating my clients on nutrition. My older clients are delighted they remember feeding "table scraps" to their animals and how well they did!

- There is great deal of misunderstanding among pet owners about nutrition. There is an overuse of vitamins to treat perceived deficiencies in commercial diets, yet defects in the animal are probably more genetically influenced then diet influenced
- I question the real advantages of costly specialty foods over "middle of the road" quality foods made by qualified companies
- Many people feed low cost, offbrand foods because the packaging claims the food is 100% complete and balanced and it is 1/3 as expensive