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From *Animal Issues*, Volume 34 Number 1, Spring 2003

## Pet Food: Buyer Beware

By Debbie Giles

I first realized something was wrong when I noticed my dog Murphy having trouble getting up from his bed. He seemed to hurt every time he moved. The next time I went to the store, I spotted "Healthy Joint Formula" dog food, whose label claimed that "glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate, and hyaluronic acid" help rebuild joints. Wanting to do what was best for my pal, I considered purchasing a bag. Luckily, I consulted Murphy's veterinarian first, and it was through that conversation that I started to learn about the complexities of pet food labeling.

### Consumer Confusion

When it comes to pet food, it's easy for even the most conscientious consumer to be bamboozled. For example, I learned from Murphy's vet that the ingredients marketed as helpful for rebuilding joints are not "generally regarded as safe" by the government. In fact, according to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) officials, it is "strictly illegal" for them to even be included in pet food. The more I discovered about pet food laws (and their meager enforcement), the more shocked I became.

Most people don't know that the pet food industry is largely self-regulated. The few laws that do exist are poorly enforced, leaving consumers with little recourse. In addition to modest federal standards, some states have enacted tougher rules, but even these are generally inadequate. For example, in California, no resources are allotted for enforcement of the state's pet food regulations, which are based on guidelines that are more than 30 years old. The sad fact is that concerns about the quality of pet food fall low on the list of priorities of government officials, even though good nutrition is one of the most important factors in determining whether an animal will lead a long and healthy life.

### Who's in Charge?

Strictly speaking, the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) is responsible for regulating pet food in the U.S. According to its mission statement, the CVM aims "to foster public and animal health by approving safe and effective products for animals." Its responsibilities include overseeing standards for pet food ingredient definitions, preservatives, additives, and labeling.

In theory; the CVM provides consumers with some level of assurance that the pet food they buy is safe and nutritionally adequate. In actuality, however; the federal government requires that only four pieces of information be printed on pet food labels: a statement that the contents are intended for consumption by animals; a net quantity statement; a

detailed listing of all product ingredients; and the name and business address of the product's manufacturer, packer, or distributor. Unfortunately, these sparse guidelines don't provide consumers with substantive information regarding food quality or accuracy of labeling claims.

Few other pet food quality-control mechanisms exist. State regulations are often modeled after guidelines established by the Association of American Feed Control Officials, or AAFCO. AAFCO is a non-governmental, nonprofit body made up of at least one representative from each state's Department of Agriculture. AAFCO also includes "advisors," or special interest group representatives, mostly from the pet food industry but also from animal-related organizations, including API. While advisors have no real authority and cannot vote on standards, they wield influence through lobbying.

It is important for consumers to understand that although pet food labels may state that a product meets AAFCO standards, AAFCO is not a regulatory agency and has no enforcement powers. Further, AAFCO guidelines apply only to nutrients in pet food. Products that meet AAFCO standards -- and therefore appear to consumers to be healthy -- can still include illegal ingredients not recognized as safe. AAFCO's aim is to develop model regulations and to provide "guidance, information and tools to state feed regulators so that they may address illegal and unacceptable ingredients found in the marketplace." Ultimately, if a state adopts AAFCO's model pet food regulations (or any other standards), the enforcement of such laws is solely the responsibility of state feed control officials.

### **Food or Medicine?**

The emergence of "enhanced" pet foods is a source of serious concern for animal advocates. Increasingly, profit-hungry manufacturers are marketing these products as forms of medicine, claiming that the foods can treat various ailments ranging from hairballs to depression to tumors. These are the foods that so often contain unapproved nutrients and other ingredients not recognized as safe. Not only do such products violate FDA and AAFCO rules, they could be putting your animal's health at risk.

While some nutritional supplements maybe helpful to humans, little research has been conducted on their effect on companion animals; some may even be harmful. Animals have entirely different physiologies than do humans -- what's beneficial for one species is not necessarily good for another. (Chocolate, for example, which many people consider a heavenly treat, can be fatal to dogs.)

As consumers, we have the right to know what is in the food we buy for our animal companions. But we also have the responsibility to educate ourselves about pet food labeling and ingredients. Here are some tips for conscientious companion animal guardians:

- While pet food labels are confusing, they can also provide valuable nutritional information, if you know what to look for. Learn to recognize ingredients. For guidance, read API's investigative report, "[What's Really in Pet Food](#)."
- Packaging claims not specifically aimed at approved nutrients are usually nothing more than marketing ploys. Always be skeptical of pet foods that purport to cure specific ailments such as joint stiffness or dry skin. Scientific studies may not be available to support such claims.
- Don't confuse store-bought pet food with medicine. If your companion animal seems to be suffering in some way, the most responsible thing to do is to see a veterinarian.

- Consult with a veterinarian before making changes in your companion animal's diet. The vet will usually know about your animal's general health needs and other factors that should be taken into consideration before trying a new food.
- Because few veterinarians receive extensive training in animal nutrition, you should do your own research, as well. Available API resources include the "[Selecting a Commercial Pet Food](#)" fact sheet and an online report, "[What's Really in Pet Food](#)." Consumers may also want to consider making their own pet food at home, after learning about companion animal nutrition.
- Don't hesitate to contact pet food manufacturers directly. If a company is interested in keeping your business, it will discuss its products with you and address any questions or concerns you may have.
- The FDA Center for Veterinary Medicine is another valuable source of information for consumers. Contact it with any questions you may have about the regulation, approval, and safety of particular ingredients found in pet food. You can also address concerns about product safety to the agency responsible for overseeing pet food in your state

### **Murphy's Story**

After an examination, Murphy's vet diagnosed him with "old age." In order to make him as comfortable as possible, we decided to forgo the "miracle" food and opted to put him on an anti-inflammatory medication, which alleviated much of his suffering. As a result, Murphy enjoyed another year and a half of relatively pain-free living. But his story might have had a different ending had we not taken him to the vet and researched our options, and instead relied -- as many companion animal guardians do -- upon the sweeping, unsubstantiated claims printed on a bag of pet food.