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Pet Food Matters

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When we share our homes with a dog or a cat or both, their grooming, exercise, veterinary care, diet, and health matter to us. As caregivers we want to provide our four-legged friends with the best possible care that we can. We read articles and books about products that will enhance our companion animals' lives. At Christmas we buy them a gift, be it a toy or a special treat. We ask our friends for referrals to a "good veterinarian." But when it comes to pet food, how much do we really know about the food we feed our companions?

One of the most important choices an animal caregiver can make is which food to feed his or her dog or cat. Yet most of us go into the supermarket or pet store and blindly choose the bag or can that has a great package, or a famous name on the label, or whatever is on sale that week. We often make this decision, the most important factor in the health and longevity of our companion animal, based on advertising rather than quality nutrition. Yet nutrition plays a major role in preventing or creating health problems in companion animals.

Tens of thousands of years ago before humans began to domesticate them, cats and dogs apparently selected a complete and balanced diet from the choices nature provided them. Now, a single food is usually expected to be sufficient because humans accept the "nutritionally complete and balanced" claims that pet food manufacturers print on their labels. Unfortunately, the nutritional needs of dogs and cats vary greatly between individual animals and this guarantee is not always enough.

Who regulates the claims made on pet food labels? There are virtually no federal regulations for the pet food industry. Pet food is regulated state by state in the U.S. At least one representative from each state's department of agriculture belongs to the American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), which is not a government agency. AAFCO, in association with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Center for Veterinary Medicine, is the *only* governing body that oversees pet food ingredients, ingredient definitions, food additives, preservatives, and labeling. These two agencies ought to provide adequate oversight, but pet food manufacturers follow AAFCO standards only on a voluntary basis. Following the standards is not required by law. In reality, pet food manufacturing is a very loosely regulated industry.

Changing the Standards

In the early 1970s the National Research Council (NRC) of the Academy of Sciences recommended that all dog food go through standardized feeding trials before the

manufacturers could claim "complete and balanced diet." This format, always difficult to regulate, prevailed until 1991. By that time, growing complaints from veterinarians, manufacturers, and consumers prompted AAFCO, the Pet Food Institute (the trade association of the pet food industry), and the FDA to begin a series of changes that would replace the NRC standards for pet food.

AAFCO designed an alternative procedure for claiming nutritional adequacy. Instead of conducting feed trials to evaluate the nutritional adequacy of each individual food, chemical analysis is done to decide if it will meet or exceed NRC requirements. Chemical analysis, however, is unable to determine the biological availability of nutrients, whether animals will like the taste, or whether the components can be easily digested. Being aware of these limitations, AAFCO established "nutritional allowance," which is an amount of a nutrient added over and above what is required to provide a margin of safety for completeness. Therefore, *in theory*, anyone can produce a nutritionally balanced and complete diet merely by following the recipes developed by AAFCO. However, keep in mind that the margin of safety of these standards does not allow for digestibility and availability problems in formulated foods.

Ingredients Vary

One of the potential problems with this method is that the ingredients used to make pet foods vary greatly from formula to formula and from brand to brand. Many of the ingredients are discards from the human food chain, considered "unfit for human consumption." Cereals and grains used are often of the lowest quality, and because they may not be digested easily, they may not provide the essential amino acids an animal requires.

Meat sources are added to provide the needed amino acids, but these too are the least expensive products available and are often unfit for human consumption. Major sources of animal protein for pet food are rendering plants. Contaminated or spoiled meat, 4D (dead, diseased, dying, or disabled) animals, slaughterhouse discards, wildlife roadkill, even euthanized cats and dogs, are cooked into rendered product and added to some brands of pet food as a source of protein.

Low-cost fillers, high in carbohydrates, sometimes replace protein. Carbohydrates are not a necessary part of most companion animals' diets. Carbohydrate-rich foods vary greatly in digestibility and if not cooked correctly digestibility can be poor. Cost rather than quality dictate which carbohydrates are used in commercial pet food. Low-cost pet food with poor quality carbohydrate and protein sources may cause a variety of health problems.

Ask Your Vet?

Where do you go for help? Will your veterinarian be able to give you advice on nutrition for your cat or dog? In the past ten years knowledge about canine and feline nutrition has grown steadily. Sadly, however, veterinarians are not always aware of current nutritional information or trends. Many veterinarians know about nutrition only from a term or two of study in veterinary school, and that may have been some time ago. And other veterinarians may be quite confident that the pet food company they support provides good nutrition, but instead of educating themselves on the subject or the products, they have probably accepted the pet food company's own claims on its nutritional values.

The questions you ask your veterinarian as a client can change that. When you express

your interest in good nutrition to your veterinarian, you may inspire her to educate herself about the recent advances that have been made in animal nutrition. In any case, it is important that you include your veterinarian in making changes in your companion animal's nutrition, but do not be afraid to seek a second opinion. It is also a good idea for you to educate yourself about nutrition from the books on pet food available at your library or local bookstore.

One alternative to commercial pet food is a home-prepared diet. Should you choose to make your own pet food, it is vital that you consult with a veterinarian or veterinary nutrition specialist to create a recipe that ensures a complete and balanced diet. Some books available on pet nutrition include recipes.

Another way to improve your companion animals' diet is to supplement a quality premium brand of kibble with fresh foods such as meat or vegetables. For further information on this important issue, please see the [API Shopping Guide](#) and the [API Pet Food Report](#).