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## Common Questions About Pet Foods

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### *The most common question is:* **How Much Do I Feed My Pet?**

Well, the answer may not be what you are expecting. You might be expecting us to tell you exactly how much volume of whatever food you are currently feeding. There are just too many variables for us to be answer that accurately. The most important of these variables are level of activity, individual metabolism, calorie concentration of the food you have chosen, access to treats or another pet’s food. The level of activity variable itself can also vary, not only between individuals but can also vary for an individual seasonally. There is an easy answer however, one that you may not have thought of. Learn to [‘Body Condition Score’](#) your pet. That means, learn what to feel for on your pet’s body. Learn the landmarks and what to feel for. If your

pet is too thin, then feed some more. If your pet is too heavy, then feed less. Upon request, we will show you how to body condition score your pet. We can also provide you with an information handout on body condition scoring.

## What Food Is The Best?

The answer, to that question is impossible to answer. Instead, the question the pet owner should be asking is, "What is the best food for my individual pet?" Pets are individuals and may respond better to one diet than to another.

## Okay, So What Is the Best Food For My Pet?

**There is no best diet, despite all the marketing claims to the contrary.** Every pet is unique and the goal is to find the best diet for the individual pet. Expense doesn't necessarily equal quality. There are some inexpensive diets that have years of rigorous scientific testing behind them and some very expensive diets that are lacking in vital nutrients or based on unsound science. Larger companies that have been in business for a long time, generally have more stringent quality control protocols, employ expert nutritionists and food scientists, and strive to increase our collective nutrition knowledge through research. Smaller manufacturers or those not in business long may have less control over ingredient quality, perform less laboratory testing and are less likely to employ full or part time veterinary nutritionists and may be less interested in increasing our collective knowledge through research.

A good rule of thumb is that if the marketing of a product sounds too good to be true, the manufacturer cites studies or research that they cannot provide to you or makes claims that cannot be substantiated, then that's a red flag that the diet should be avoided.

With the thousands of pet foods available today, and changing weekly, an owner's decision about what to feed his or her pet has become a more complicated question than it ever has been. Nor is there one simple answer since the "best" food for a pet depends on many factors, such as breed, life stage, body condition, exercise (or lack thereof), environment, and health status. That is why it is important that before a recommendation can be made, your veterinarian should get to know your pet. All too often, owners base their decisions on slick marketing, or unsubstantiated claims made by internet web sites rather than on objective nutritional information.

## So How Can A Pet Owner Determine the Quality of a Pet Food?

A pet owner should look at two things, the manufacturer's reputation and the 'AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement'.

### The Manufacturer's Reputation

Do some research on the manufacturer. How long has the pet food manufacturer been in business? Does the manufacturer perform pet nutritional research which it shares for the common good of all pets? The best pet foods are produced by reputable manufacturers, with long histories of research and sharing it's knowledge for the common good of society. Are there some good foods made by new companies? Yes, there might be some

great foods made by new companies. If you would like more information as to how to evaluate a manufacturer, ask for our Intermediate Level information on Pet Nutrition.

### **AAFCO Nutritional Adequacy Statement**

First of all, what is AAFCO? AAFCO is an acronym for the 'Association of American Feed Control Officials'. AAFCO is a non-profit organization that sets standards for both animal feeds and pet foods in the United States.

*So, then, what is an AAFCO Nutrient Profile?*

In order for a pet food to be marketed as "complete and balanced", it must meet the nutritional standards established by AAFCO in one of two ways. AAFCO nutritional standards mostly define minimum nutrients that need to be in the food.

- Laboratory analysis only
- Laboratory analysis plus actual feeding trials. With a feeding trial, unforeseen problems with bioavailability or nutrient interactions will be detected. Feeding trials provide better assurance that the food meets a dog's or a cat's requirements.

So, the BEST pet foods are those manufactured by reputable manufactures, with a long history of research AND have passed AAFCO laboratory analysis and feeding trials. **However, the vast majority of pet foods are only lab tested, and have not gone through AAFCO feeding trials.**

*How do I differentiate between 'laboratory analysis only' and 'laboratory analysis plus a feeding trial' ?*

When feeding trials have been performed, the label should read, "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that [*brand name of food*] provides completed and balanced nutrition for growth (or maintenance)."

If the food is only formulated to meet nutritional laboratory requirements, the label must read, "[*brand name of food*] is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Dog (or Cat) Food Nutrient Profiles..."

Again, remember, the vast majority of pet foods have NOT gone through feeding trials and only use the AAFCO nutrient profiles (and the profiles mostly define nutrient minimums and not maximums).

Also, be aware that over-the-counter foods that state "for intermittent or supplemental use only" are not complete and balanced and should not be fed. Over-the-counter foods that have this label are to be considered treats. On the other hand, veterinary therapeutic diets, diets designed for medical conditions, may also have this "intermittent or supplemental use only" statement because they may be specifically designed not to meet AAFCO minimums (e.g., renal diets).

### **Is the ingredient list a good way to determine the quality of a pet food?**

**Answer: Not really, there is no legal definition of 'quality' for pet food therefore 'quality ingredients' are determined by slick, often misleading marketing techniques.**

**Ultimately, you have to use a food that works for your individual pet.**

Although ingredient lists are commonly used by lay people to determine the quality of pet foods, this approach has many pitfalls and is very subjective to intentional manipulation by the food manufacturers. Ingredients are

listed on labels in order of weight, including water, so ingredients with high water content (like fresh meats and vegetables) are going to be listed higher than similar amounts of dry ingredients even though they may contribute fewer nutrients to the overall diet. Additionally, ingredients from the same source - chicken meat, chicken fat and chicken by-product meal for example - can be split into component parts, further complicating assessment.

A diet full of great sounding ingredients can be less nutritious than a diet containing less appealing (to humans) ingredients. Some manufacturers may add ingredients to diets solely for marketing purposes, to increase the appeal of the diet to consumers. These ingredients may have unproven benefits, be present in miniscule amounts and provide nothing to the diet but added expense. More ingredients also mean more quality control (and more time and expense) is necessary to ensure that the finished product adheres to the desired nutrient formulation.

Even the phrase 'human grade' has no legal meaning in the pet food industry. Basically, any manufacturer can slap on a label that states 'human grade' ingredients, no matter what the quality of the food. Once a product is destined for inclusion in pet food, it is no longer fit for human consumption by definition. Moreover, ingredients sourced from the human food chain are not necessarily any more nutritious, wholesome, or safe than ingredients initially destined for pet food. Therefore, manufacturer's claims of 'human grade ingredients' should not be over interpreted.

Terms such as "premium", "holistic", "quality", and "gourmet" also, have no legal definition for pet foods and are purely marketing terms. The term's 'natural' and 'organic' do have legal meanings. For more information, ask for our client handout titled "Pet Food Information Intermediate Level"

In summary, can you judge the quality of a food by it's ingredient list? The answer is 'No'. 'Quality' has no legal definition in pet foods and claims for 'quality' are based on slick, marketing techniques.

## **Raw Pet Foods**

See our [client information sheet on Raw Pet Foods](#)

## Grains and Grain Free Pet Foods

### My friend says that grains are bad for dogs, is she correct?

Not true. There is no sound scientific evidence to show that grains are bad for dogs. Can you feed a dog a diet without grains, sure you can. If your dog does well on a food without grains, fantastic, go for it. If your dog does well on a food with grains, fantastic, go for it. Feed your dog what seems to help him or her thrive. There is just no scientific reason to avoid grains in dog food. The accusations that are made about 'bad' grains are made by pet food manufacturers trying to create a niche for themselves.

See our client information sheet on Grains and [Grain-Free Pet Foods](#)

## By-Products

### I read online that 'by-products' can contain hair, hooves and floor sweepings. Is this true?

**Answer: False.** As a matter of fact, by-products can be good sources of nutrients. Like all other ingredients, their quality can vary. By-products are commonly vilified, often by diet manufacturers trying to carve out market share for themselves by offering diets that do not contain them. AAFCO definitions of mammal by-products specifically exclude hair, hooves, horn, hide trimmings, manure and intestinal contents, as well as anything that is not specifically part of the carcass (such as floor sweepings).

For more information about by-products, ask for our [Pet Nutrition Information - Intermediate Level](#)

### Can I feed my pet according to the feeding directions on the label?

Pet food labels must list feeding directions. Many feeding guidelines overestimate the amount a dog or cat should eat (although some of the pet food companies are beginning to revise their labels to contain more reasonable estimates). **Therefore, feeding directions should be used only as a starting point and owners must make adjustments to keep the pet in trim body condition.** Westonka Animal Hospital typically recommends that owners start at the lower end of the recommended range for most animals (even lower if they have a low activity level) and then carefully monitor body weight for the first several weeks on the new diet so that adjustments can be made as needed. You may use our weight scales at our hospital, feel free to bring your pet in to get weighed. Also, pet owners should learn to body condition score their own pets! Ask one of our team members how you can learn this pet owner skill.

It seems obvious that the calorie content of the food would be on the label but the reality is, calorie content is not required label information (except for "light" foods). The calorie information is allowed on the label and some pet food companies are starting to include the calorie content. This is very helpful information to be able to compare foods. There are maximum caloric densities for foods that are described as "light," "lite," or "low calorie" (for example, a dry dog food must contain  $\leq 3100$  kcal/kg). In addition, when a food is described as such, the label must contain a calorie content statement. However, these foods still vary tremendously in terms of the calories per cup or can, so one must be careful to select one that is appropriate in calorie and nutrient level for the individual pet.

## Should I try to feed a natural or organic pet food?

Ask for a copy of our client information sheet on [Natural and/or Organic Pet Foods](#).

## Should I feed my puppy an 'Adult' food, an 'All Stages' or a 'Puppy' Food?

We recommend that you feed your puppy a puppy food. Furthermore, we recommend that you feed your large breed puppy a 'large breed' puppy food. So, what is a large breed? First, there is no legal definition of what a 'large breed' puppy is. Westonka Animal Hospital has established the criteria of a 'large breed' to an anticipated adult weight of 50# or more.

A food that is labeled as being appropriate for "All Stages" or "All Life Stages", we do not recommend for large breed puppies nor adult dogs. Yes, such a labeled food has enough minimal nutrients for small breed puppies (which require the highest concentration of nutrients) but it has too many nutrients for a large breed puppy and adult dogs (no matter the breed). Also, adult dogs do not need all concentrated calories and nutrients such as that found in the "All Stages" diets.

Large breed puppies do have special nutritional needs. Large breed puppies can have bone/joint development problems if fed too much energy (making them grow too fast) or with the incorrect balance of minerals (too much or too little calcium). This is why some breeders will recommend an adult food versus a puppy food. Yes, it is true that an adult food, MAY contain less energy and MAY slow down the growth. 'Large breed' puppy foods do contain less energy and will slow the growth. However, to feed an adult dog food rather than a 'large breed' puppy food is not an OK recommendation for several reasons:

- Puppy and adult requirements differ mainly in minimums, but not maximums. So, an "adult food" may have more energy density and more calcium than a large breed puppy food. Some "adult" foods are actually formulated to be an all life stages food, INCLUDING SMALL BREED PUPPIES so you are really not changing much from a 'puppy' diet to 'all stages' diet. You want a food specifically labeled for large breeds.

- Adult foods not formulated for growth can result in deficiencies in several nutrients. Puppies have some minimum nutrient requirements higher than adult dogs.

## Nutrition Resources



**Westonka Animal Hospital & Laser Surgery Center**

**Mound, MN**

**Phone: (952) 472-4900**

**"Where Smart Pets Bring Their People"**

**[www.westonka.vet](http://www.westonka.vet)**

## Nutrition Resources

American Academy of Veterinary Nutrition

[www.aavn.org](http://www.aavn.org)

American Animal Hospital Association Nutritional Assessment Guidelines

[www.aahanet.org/resources/guidelines.aspx](http://www.aahanet.org/resources/guidelines.aspx)

American College of Veterinary Nutrition

Listing of board-certified veterinary nutritionists who will formulate nutritionally balanced homemade food recipes for veterinarians and/or pet owners

[www.acvn.org/](http://www.acvn.org/)

Association of American Feed Control Officials

[www.aafco.org](http://www.aafco.org)

FDA Animal and Veterinary Site (including pet food)

[www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/default.htm](http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/default.htm)

FDA Guidelines About Handling Raw Pet Foods

<http://www.fda.gov/animalveterinary/resourcesforyou/animalhealthliteracy/ucm368730.htm>

National Research Council Pet Nutrition Guides for Owners

<http://dels-old.nas.edu/banr/petdoor.html>

Pet Food Institute Consumer Guide

[www.petfoodreport.com](http://www.petfoodreport.com)