How To Select the Best Food For Your Pet

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Years ago, a major pet food manufacturer, in order to illustrate the importance of using quality, highly digestible pet food ingredients, created an unconventional diet called the "Old Shoe" diet. This "unique" formulation provided 10% crude protein, 6.5% crude fat, and 2.4% fiber - acceptable levels until you consider what the diet was made of: four pairs of old leather work shoes, one gallon of used crankcase oil, one pail of crushed coal, and 68 pounds of water.

The "Old Shoe" diet clearly illustrates the need for ingredients actually useful to a pet's body. A dog or cat could not eat old shoes, used oil, and coal, and live. The pet's digestive system would take virtually nothing from eating this mixture, and in fact, it would be very harmful.

Why is my choice in pet food such an important decision?

Just as studies focused on human nutrition have illustrated that eating higher-quality food is better for our health, similar studies have proven "you are what you eat" is just as true in pets as it is in humans. Pets that eat a healthy diet and live a healthy lifestyle are more likely to stay healthy.

A healthy diet ensures your pet receives optimum nutrition. Pets that receive optimum nutrition generally have better overall body condition, including healthier skin - a critical organ system in pets. Generally, pets that receive optimum nutrition also have a soft and healthy hair coat, healthy muscle tone, increased disease resistance, and a higher activity level.

Pet Foods Come In Three Basic Categories

When searching for your pet's next food, keep in mind that pet food is basically available in three major categories: "grocery store" foods, premium foods, and Healthy foods.

- "Grocery store" foods - These are the foods found in grocery stores and

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mass-market retailers. They are typically made to be more economical and contain lower-quality, less-digestible, and inexpensive ingredients. While easy on the pocketbook, "grocery store" foods normally do not provide your pet with the healthiest, most nutrient-dense ingredients, so are not as beneficial for your pet.

Their energy values may be lower, their proteins are often lower-grade (and therefore less digestible), and you need to feed more to have your pet receive the same nutrition as he would eating a higher quality food. Unfortunately, this can lead to a larger quantity of stool (and more to pick up in the yard).

You're also likely to see artificial preservatives in these foods, like ethoxyquin, BHA, and BHT, as well as a number of by-products. Many times the pet food company that produces the food follows a set recipe created for them by their manufacturing facility, and often these facilities use the least expensive ingredients available that still meet the desired levels of certain nutrients without taking into consideration whether your pet will be able to digest or absorb the nutrients because of their quality. A standard pet food like this will often short-change your pet's health.

- Premium foods - These are often considered the "name brand" pet foods. They can be found in grocery stores, pet stores, and veterinarian offices. These contain higher-grade ingredients, including quality protein sources, but may still include some elements of "grocery store" food, such as artificial colors, artificial flavors, and chemical preservatives. Premium foods are usually more expensive than "grocery store" foods because of their higher-quality ingredients, and are therefore somewhat more beneficial and digestible.
- Healthy foods - The newest addition to the pet food market, Healthy foods, represents an evolution in quality. They provide pets with the highest-quality, and most nutritious ingredients without some of the problem ingredients in premium or grocery store foods. All of the Drs. Foster and Smith Foods fall into this category.

  Pet owners are becoming increasingly familiar with the benefits of feeding their pets Healthy foods, and the popularity and scope of Healthy foods continues to grow - which is great because that means more pets are eating better food and benefiting greatly from this better nutrition.

  In Healthy foods, higher quality ingredients are used - such as real meat, fish, or poultry protein sources as one of the first two ingredients, whole fruits and vegetables, and specific vitamins and minerals for the particular lifestage formula of the food. Here's what you can expect from Healthy foods:

  - Fresh, wholesome protein sources such as real meat, poultry or fish (NOT meat by-products) as one of the first two ingredients, to strengthen muscles.
  - Quality carbohydrate sources like whole grains and rice to help maximize energy.
  - Fiber from real vegetable sources such as potatoes or beet pulp to help

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maintain healthy digestion and bowel function.
- Vitamin-rich vegetables and fruits such as sweet potatoes, carrots, apples, and cranberries to offer natural sources of easily-absorbed nutrients.
- Natural fat sources like sunflower and fish oils to supply energy and help maintain skin and coat health.
- Natural preservatives such as Vitamin E, mixed tocopherols and citric acid, to slow the process of fat oxidation which causes food to spoil.

Healthy foods also contain no hormones, and no artificial preservatives, flavors, or colors. They contain more nutrition per ounce, so you can feed less to satisfy your pet's daily requirements. In the end, they turn out to be a good value because you can often feed your pet less of these foods than some economical brands.

How do I Find a Healthy Pet Food?

You find a Healthy food by reading the label on the pet food. Regardless of what a pet food may claim on the front of its package, the proof is in the pudding (the ingredients list). By law, pet food labels must list their ingredients in order by weight. So, those foods with quality protein sources like meat, fish, or poultry listed as the first or second ingredient contain higher levels of digestible, quality sources of protein.

Healthy foods have a healthy level of protein, which often exceeds the requirement set by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). We've learned that there are optimum levels of protein that should be given to pets at particular stages of their life. The level of protein a puppy or kitten needs, for example, is considerably different than the level for senior pets.

You also want to look at what kind of carbohydrates the food has. Wholesome grains such as brown rice, barley, whole oats and brewer's rice provide fiber for digestion as well as carbohydrates for energy. Next, Healthy foods contain vegetables and fruits to provide natural sources of vitamins, minerals and fiber. The fatty acids in Healthy foods will have a beneficial ratio of Omega-6 to Omega-3 acids to support skin and coat health, as well as the health of joints, heart, eyes, and other organs.

Here are a couple other ingredients you might also find in Healthy foods: direct-fed microbials (pro-biotics) to support healthy digestion, and antioxidant nutrients to support the body' normal defenses.

All Healthy foods will be fortified with vitamins and minerals to give your pet the nutrients required daily for optimal health.

You also won't find any artificial flavors, colors or preservatives like BHT, ethoxyquin, or BHA, in Healthy foods. They will contain natural preservatives like Vitamin E, mixed tocopherols, or citric acid.

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Other Factors to Keep in Mind When Selecting Food for your Pet

In addition to listening to the experts' advice on what makes a quality pet food, you also have to consider the individual needs of your pet. No two pets are the same, and therefore what works for one may not work for another. Here are some factors to consider when selecting a pet food.

- Pet's Age/Lifestage - Your dog or cat's nutritional needs vary depending upon age or life stage, as well as activity level, temperament, and environment. Puppies and kittens, because of their active and high-energy life stage, require more energy in their diet. Because their muscles and bones are also growing rapidly in this stage, they also need a diet that addresses this unique need. Adult pets need a diet that caters to specific performance or maintenance needs, while senior pets often require a diet that addresses their slowdown in metabolism and will often contain fewer calories, less protein, and more fiber than pets in other life stages.
- Pet's Body Condition - Dogs or cats that are overweight or underweight need different nutrition than those who are of normal weight. Those that get lots of exercise also have different nutritional requirements than those that do not. Seek your veterinarian's advice when choosing a food to fit your pet's needs, whether it's weight control, maintenance, or another formula.
- Pet's health history - If your pet has medical conditions such as diabetes, allergies, cancer, or digestive difficulties, you'll need to work with your veterinarian to choose a food that is appropriate for these conditions.
- Your budget - We recommend that you feed your pet the best food that you can afford. Generally, the more you spend, the higher the quality and nutrition you'll receive in return. Economy brands of pet food, while often easy on the pocketbook, are made with the cheapest ingredients available, and cheap ingredients often mean less-digestibility and less usability in your pet's body.
- Your pet's preferences - Don't forget your pet's unique preferences. Pets are individuals, just like people. Some pets prefer dry food, some canned. Some pets prefer chicken, some prefer lamb or fish. You could feed a very well-formulated food to a group of dogs or cats and find that most of them do great on it, some do marginally well, and a few actually get sick from it. Make adjustments as needed, to accommodate your pet's preferences.

Start with a conversation with your veterinarian, to find out if your pet has any special health concerns you should be aware of. Then, set about to find a quality food that meets both your pet's optimal nutritional requirements, but also his or her individual preferences.

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