

How To Select the Best Food For Your Pet

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HOW TO SELECT A healthy pet food



Whether you walk the aisles of your local pet food store or shop online, you'll notice that today's choices for nutritious, high-quality pet food are greater than at any time in the past. There are more flavors and types than ever before, with offerings to suit the needs and preferences of any pet. In addition to more traditional canned and dry foods, there are raw diets, grain-free diets, and gluten-free diets, along with food rolls, and food toppers and mixers to tempt even the most finicky pet.

But with so many options, how do you know which is the right choice for your pet? Here's what you need to know to make an informed decision about your dog's daily nutrition options.

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

Good nutrition is an essential part of your pet's healthy lifestyle - as important as fresh water and regular exercise. Your dog's diet influences every aspect of his overall health - from the amount of energy he has, to the condition of his skin and coat, to the quality of his digestion.

Understanding the back of the pet food label

Nutrition is the major factor in selecting a pet food, and the back of the can or bag contains quite a bit of useful information.

Guaranteed Analysis: This section of the label provides minimum guarantees for crude protein and crude fat, and maximum guarantees for crude fiber and moisture. A manufacturer may opt to include guarantees for other nutrients also, but at a minimum these four must be listed. Foods contain varying amounts of moisture, so to

accurately compare one food to another, the water must be accounted for and these values must be converted to what is known as [dry matter basis](#). A guaranteed analysis is just a rough guide to the nutrient content in a food, with fat and protein and fiber listed in their crude forms, which doesn't give much indication about their digestibility. You can get a bit more information by looking at the ingredients.

Ingredients: Pet food labels must list their ingredients in descending order by weight. This means that the ingredients you see at the beginning of the list are generally present in the largest amounts. Ingredients that weigh the least, like vitamins and minerals, will be at the end. Foods made with high-quality ingredients offer better nutrition and often allow you to feed less because they are more digestible and satisfying.

What to watch for in ingredients lists . . .

- Highly digestible protein sources such as meat, poultry, or fish (or meat, poultry or fish meal) as one of the first two ingredients. Make sure the meat or poultry is named specifically. Avoid terms like 'meat by-products'.
- Quality carbohydrate sources like whole grains, including brown rice, and legumes like lentils. You can get a rough idea of the percentage of carbohydrate in a food by subtracting the crude fat, protein and fiber (along with anything else listed in the guaranteed analysis) from 100.
- Vitamin-rich vegetables and fruits such as sweet potatoes, carrots, blueberries, and cranberries, which offer natural sources of fiber and antioxidants.
- Natural fat sources like sunflower and fish oils to supply omega fatty acids for skin and coat health.
- Natural preservatives such as mixed tocopherols and citric acid, to slow the process of fat oxidation, which causes food to spoil.
- No added hormones, and no artificial preservatives, flavors, or colors.
- Probiotic microorganisms and prebiotics like inulin (often from chicory) to support healthy digestion.

Complete and Balanced: The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) develops guidelines for the labeling and sale of animal feeds and pet foods. The [AAFCO Dog Food Nutrient Profiles](#) and [AAFCO Cat Food Nutrient Profiles](#) are nutrition standards that all pet foods should meet. Pet foods which meet AAFCO's requirements can be called 'Complete and Balanced', and will include one of two statements on their label.

1. The first standard states that the named pet food is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Dog (or Cat) Food Nutrient Profiles for animals in that life stage (Growth, Gestation/Lactation, Maintenance, or All Life Stages). This means the food was tested in the laboratory and found to have the recommended amounts of protein, fat, etc.
2. The second standard states that animal-feeding tests using AAFCO procedures

substantiate that this product provides complete and balanced nutrition for animals in a particular life stage. For a pet food to be able to carry this label, it had to be tested on a population of animals and shown to provide adequate nutrition.

Admittedly, the AAFCO guidelines may not be perfect, but they do give you assurance that a pet food is 'Complete and Balanced' and meets these basic nutritional guidelines. Without the AAFCO statement of nutritional adequacy, you have no assurance at all other than what the manufacturer states on the label.

Feeding Guidelines: Feeding instructions should be included on all pet foods. These guidelines give the recommended amount to be fed based on weight. These are very general guidelines and should only be used as a rough starting point. Factors such as activity level, metabolism, breed, and age all impact daily requirements. If your dog is thin or hungry, feed more often and in greater quantity. If your pet is overweight or obese, feed less. Your veterinarian can determine your pet's [body condition score](#) and recommend the appropriate number of daily calories.

Calorie Statement: Look for the term 'Calorie Content'. This will let you know how many calories this food contains per cup. Feeding guidelines are rather general because they are usually given in a range. For example, "For 3-10 lbs, feed ½-1 cup". Once you and your veterinarian have determined how many calories your pet should eat per day, knowing the calories per cup will allow you to fine-tune the feeding instructions so they are more accurate for your pet.

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

In addition to listening to 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 other 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 proper amounts of protein, and minerals in proper amounts and ratios to address these needs. [Adult pets](#) may need a diet that caters to specific performance or maintenance needs, while [senior pets](#) often require a diet that addresses their slower metabolism with 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.

Pet's Health History: If your pet has medical conditions such as diabetes, allergies, kidney disease, cancer, or digestive difficulties, you'll need to work with your veterinarian to choose a [prescription 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 wallet, are often made with the cheapest ingredients available, and cheap ingredients often mean less digestibility and less usability in your pet's body. Remember that with lower quality foods you often need to feed more and it may not always be cheaper in the long run.

Your Pet's Preferences: Don't forget your pet's unique preferences. Pets are individuals, just like people. Some prefer canned food, some like dry kibble. Some love chicken while others prefer lamb or fish.

Before you begin searching for a new food for your pet, have a conversation with your veterinarian, to find out if your pet has any special nutritional needs. Then use our guidelines to narrow the search for the diet that is the best fit for both you and your pet. Any new food should be [added in gradually](#), to allow your pet's digestive system plenty of time to adjust. Keep in mind that pets are individuals just like people. There is no single food on the market that is 'best' for every dog or every cat. Don't be afraid to keep looking until you find the best fit for your dog in terms of nutrition and digestibility, form, flavor, and price.