

Dog Food, How to Choose

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff



Choosing a dog food in today's extensive pet food market can prove challenging. With the vast array of choices in today's pet food market, how can you tell which food is best?

Factors to address before selecting a dog food

- **Your dog's age/life stage** - make sure you choose a food that's nutritionally geared to your dog's age (puppy, adult, or senior).
- **Your dog's body condition** - dogs who are overweight or underweight need different nutrition than those who are not. Dogs who get lots of exercise also have different nutritional requirements. Choose a food that fits your dog's needs, whether it's weight control, performance, maintenance, or another formula.
- **Your dog's health history** - if your dog has medical conditions such as diabetes, allergies, cancer, or digestive difficulties, you'll need to choose a food that is appropriate for that condition.
- **Your budget** - simply put, feed your dog the best food you can afford. Generally, the more you spend, the better-quality, healthier food you'll feed.

Consider Your Dog's Preferences

Keep in mind that no one food is best for every dog. Dogs are individuals, just like people. Some dogs prefer dry food, some canned. Some dogs prefer chicken, some prefer lamb. You could feed a brand of very well-formulated food to a group of dogs and find that most of them do great on it, some do marginally well, and a few actually get sick from it. Luckily, today's market offers many well-formulated dog foods for dogs at all life stages, and it's fine to try several to determine which one works best for your dog.

Look Closely at Ingredients

When you're shopping for a healthy food for your dog, the ingredient list on the back of the bag is a good place to start. By law, pet food labels must list their ingredients in order by weight. Look for dog foods with meat, fish, or eggs listed as the first ingredient. These are very digestible, and if they are listed as the first ingredient, you can assume the food offers a good-quality protein source, and includes several valuable, usable amino acids. If you are [switching to a new food](#), be sure to allow ample time for your dog to adjust to it.

Categories of Pet Foods

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

- **"Grocery store"** foods - those found in grocery stores and mass-market retailers - are typically made with lower-quality, less-digestible, inexpensive ingredients and are therefore a cheaper alternative. While easy on the pocketbook, "grocery store" foods normally do not provide your dog with the healthiest, most nutrient-dense ingredients.
- **Premium foods** - often found in grocery stores, pet stores, and veterinarian offices - contain higher-grade ingredients,

but may still include some elements of "grocery store" food, such as artificial colors, artificial flavors, chemical preservatives, and "filler" ingredients. Premium foods are usually more expensive than "grocery store" foods because their ingredients are of a higher quality, and are therefore somewhat more beneficial and digestible.

- **Healthy foods** - the newest addition to the pet food market - provide pets with the highest quality, healthiest, and most nutritious ingredients. They are typically available for purchase online or direct from the manufacturer. Foods in the Healthy class - including the [Drs. Foster & Smith line of foods](#), and others - contain nutrient-rich ingredients.

Formulated to provide optimum health benefits for pets, these foods often use whole, fresh fruits and vegetables, real meat as the primary protein source, and carbohydrate-rich whole grains like brown rice and barley. They should not contain artificial preservatives, flavors, or colors. They will almost always be fortified with additional vitamins and minerals, and will use the best natural sources for fatty acids to help build healthy skin and a beautiful coat. Because healthy foods use high quality ingredients, you should expect to pay a little more than you would for other types of pet food. Remember, though, with healthy foods you can generally feed less since healthy foods are more nutrient-dense than other types of food.

Check your dog's health after a month

After you've done all you can to make sure a food is healthy and beneficial, take a look at your dog after feeding the food for at least a month. Bright eyes, a shiny coat, and a healthy energy level will let you know you've chosen a good source for your dog's nutrition. If you need assistance selecting a food for your dog, seek veterinary/professional advice.

