

Milwaukee Veterinary Medical Association 2015
Deciphering Fact From Fiction When Evaluating Pet Foods

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How to evaluate a pet food and make a diet recommendation

Clients can bombard the veterinarian and veterinary staff with questions about pet food. With almost 5000 different product labels on the market it is inevitable veterinarians will be asked about a product they are not familiar with. Advice and information recommending *the* best food is readily available almost anywhere; from trainers to pet food retailers, from magazines, internet sources and social media. However these voices can be strongly biased and may compete with the veterinarian healthcare team's advice. Therefore veterinary professionals need to be competent and confident in evaluating new or less familiar products in order to make nutritional recommendations for their patients and help owners make sound nutritional decisions for their pet. When evaluating a pet food, the label is a good place to start. All pet food labels must include the following: a guaranteed analysis (% nutrient content as fed), a nutritional adequacy statement according to standards required by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), an ingredient list, food name and type, feeding guideline and manufacturer contact information (Zicker, 2008). A systematic approach to evaluating labels is a useful first step in assessing a product for your patient.

Many of the rating systems and pet food reviews are based on judgments about ingredients. With the exception of patients with adverse reactions or primary food allergies, or a traditional Chinese medicine approach, this is often the least useful information provided. Clients also want to prioritize ingredients and much of their information is based on misconceptions. The veterinary team must be careful not to discount client concerns, yet use the opportunity to educate and guide owners in their decision-making about pet foods.

What follows is a suggested approach to assessing labels and pet food products for indicators of a product's nutritional value and potential impact on pet health.

Suggested in descending order of importance:

Manufacturer contact information

Contact the manufacturer whenever you have questions about a product. This can provide you with valuable information as well as an indication of how willing a company is to work with the veterinary profession. The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) (Baldwin 2010) and the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA, 2011) Nutritional Assessment Guidelines lists an excellent set of potential questions to ask of manufacturers:

- Do you have a veterinary nutritionist or equivalent on staff and available to answer questions?
- Who formulates the diets and what are their nutritional credentials?
- Which diets are tested using AAFCO feeding trials vs formulation?

- What is the caloric value (per can/cup)?
- Will you provide nutrient analysis and digestibility of your products?
- Describe your quality control measures to assure consistency and quality
- Where are your diets produced and manufactured?
- What kinds of research have been conducted on your products? Where is it published?

Nutritional Adequacy

A statement of nutritional adequacy developed by AAFCO is required on all pet food packages. Nutritional adequacy can be met either 1) through animal feeding trials or 2) through formulation tests. Feeding trials are conducted with animals to ensure that nutrients in a given food or line of foods are present in sufficient quantities to promote good health *and* are bio-available to the animal ensuring the nutrients are digested properly. Formulated products have had nutrient content confirmed by mathematical calculations (adding nutrient content listed in a database of ingredients) or by laboratory testing. The formulation method does not include testing involving animals. Feeding trials allow for an *in vivo* product evaluation and are preferable to formulations.

Life Stage Claim

AAFCO requires that foods meet and disclose one of two nutrient profiles based on the pet's life stage. The "maintenance" life stage nutrient profile is designed to meet the nutritional needs for adult dogs or cats. The "growth and reproduction" nutrient profile is designed to meet the nutritional needs for puppies or kittens as well as pregnant or lactating adults. A product with a nutritional adequacy statement designated to meet 'all life-stages' must meet standards for both. Pet foods designed for a single life-stage (i.e. 'maintenance' or 'growth and reproduction') better match the nutrient profiles for pets of that life stage. Products formulated for "all life stages" may contain excessive amounts of some nutrients, which can result in overfeeding. It is better to feed pets with food designed to match their life stage. It is important to remember that there is no AAFCO defined nutrient profile for senior/geriatric life stage and the nutrient content of products marketed for senior pets can vary widely.

Caloric Content Disclosure

Because of the prevalence of obesity in pets, caloric disclosure and labeling is essential for veterinarians to assess and counsel clients about purchasing pet foods that meet the energy needs of their pets. Unfortunately, caloric disclosure is not yet required by law and remains optional for manufacturers to include on packaging. Without information on caloric content, pet owners run the risk of over feeding their pets, resulting in obesity and related health problems. Companies that choose to report the caloric content are preferred. Making calorie content readily accessible greatly helps the veterinary team determine a proper food dose when making a nutritional recommendation, and allows consumers to make comparisons between foods and select more appropriate feeding portions.

Ingredients

Evaluation of the ingredient list is often the most controversial aspect when interpreting a label. Evaluating ingredients presents challenges for clients because they are barraged with marketing claims, misinformation and even scare tactics. Evaluation of ingredient lists remains challenging for many veterinary professionals because transparency about ingredients, ingredient sources, and processing methods beyond the minimum of what is legally required is generally difficult to come by in the pet food industry. In addition, the nutrient-based scientific literature is not comprehensive, especially when compared to the research base for human nutrition. Although there is widespread misunderstanding about pet food ingredients, the major ingredients commonly used in pet food (beef, poultry by product, lamb meal etc.) are fairly well regulated and defined by AAFCO. Many fruits, vegetables, and other seemingly healthy ingredients have no AAFCO definition for the ingredient. If an ingredient definition does not exist, AAFCO regulations state that it “shall be identified by the common or usual name.” For example, ‘Apples’ or other fruits may contain seeds, stems, leaves, skins, or pulp. While pulp may contribute nutrients to the food, the generic definition does not clearly exclude any other parts that may not be beneficial to the animal’s health. For all of these reasons, reliance on pet food ingredients as the primary way to assess a pet food product would be a poor indicator of a product’s overall health impact for a pet. As part of the initiative to consider nutrition the 5th vital assessment, a Nutrition reference manual (http://www.everypeteverytime.com/docs/en-us/Pet_Nutrition_Ref_Manual.pdf) provides an excellent description of pet food label requirements and clarifications about ingredient definitions.

Nutrition recommendation, a pet-specific process

The final steps of making a nutritional recommendation for a pet food are to use your judgment in evaluating a product and match it closely with life stage, life style and health of the pet. To complete the process, you would continue to monitor the pet’s response to make sure you see the expected results, that the patient maintains optimal health.

Recalls

Sadly, pet food safety issues remain a growing concern. We have become more aware of pet food safety issues, most dramatically evident in 2007 with melamine adulteration of wheat gluten which affected many products and led to renal failure in a number of pets. Most recently, at the time of this writing, at least 3 products have been recalled for aflatoxin contamination, and several more foods or treats with potential salmonella contamination. Pet food safety is now more closely monitored by the FDA, and there are more professional “watch-dogs” sharing information and updates about pet food recall; Veterinary Information Network (VIN), American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and State Veterinary Medical Association etc. There is now a central Food and Drug Administration (FDA) online safety reporting portal for veterinarians and owners to submit reports of concern about pet foods and treats. These can be submitted electronically:

<http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/SafetyHealth/ReportaProblem/default.htm>

If the veterinarian has suspicions about the safety of a food, this warrants a thorough diet history. Check the FDA website and contact the pet food manufacturer to alert and

confirm your concerns. You will need information from the product label, so advise client to keep the label with the food until the bag is completely consumed.

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