



The Savvy Dog Owner's Guide: Nutrition on the Internet

More than 75% of all American homes have computers and this is both a blessing and a curse. For dog owners, the internet provides vast amounts of information on many subjects. The information, however, is virtually unregulated and its quality ranges from excellent to pure quackery. Deciding which websites are trustworthy can be difficult!

Canine nutrition is a popular topic. There are literally thousands of websites, promoting everything from recipes for raw food and vegetarian diets; advertisements for supplements and holistic foods; recommendations for diets that allegedly prevent or cure disease; 'get-rich quick' pyramid-selling schemes for nutritional supplements and consultation services operated by 'nutritionists.' Many home-made diets are promoted - some which are almost nutritionally balanced; some that are mildly unbalanced and some that are downright dangerous!

All in all, many nutritional myths are perpetuated, many half-truths reinforced and many incorrect facts conveyed. There is, of course, some excellent information - but not nearly as much of it!

Surfing Tips

So how can you decide what to believe? Here are some recommendations to help you when evaluating the content of websites:

Discuss information with your veterinarian. What you read online should enhance what your vet tells you, not replace it. If in doubt, ask him or her to help you evaluate it.

Research the credentials of the site's author. Is it a pet owner; a company; a veterinarian; a PhD in animal nutrition or a board-certified veterinary nutritionist? Be careful when a person marketing his or her services claims to be a 'pet nutritionist' or a 'certified nutritionist,' as there is no standardization in training for this. The exception is a veterinary nutritionist who is board-certified by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN) or the European College of Veterinary Comparative Nutrition (ECVCN). These are veterinarians who have undergone several years of rigorous post-graduate nutrition training in approved residency programs and who have passed the ACVN or ECVCN's certifying examination.

Read the website address. Sites with an address ending in .com are commercial. Those ending in .edu are educational and those ending in .org are nonprofit organizations. Large pet food companies often have high-quality websites with good general nutrition information that is separate from their product information.

Check the source of the information. Do the authors simply state that a product 'prevents cancer' or is there a reference to a scientifically-conducted research study? It is easy - though illegal - to make unproven claims for nutritional products but it is much harder to back them up scientifically. If there is a reference, where is it from? Is it from the author's own article or promotional literature or is it from a peer-reviewed veterinary journal? Most products on the internet do not cite studies to back up their claims. Those that do often cite studies on humans or rats which may not be pertinent to dogs.

Check the timeliness of the information. Things change quickly in veterinary medicine and especially in the field of nutrition. Many websites are out of date. What was recommended two years ago may not be accepted practice today. A good website will be updated frequently.

Be wary of anecdotal information. Descriptions of one person's experience (e.g. 'When my dog was diagnosed with kidney disease I gave him 'GETBETTER' nutritional supplement and now he's cured') can be misleading. While it can be useful to hear about other people's experiences, their positive evaluations do not mean that the actual product or treatment is really beneficial. Always discuss what you've heard with your veterinarian.

Watch out for rating websites. Most websites that rank dog foods do so either on opinion or on criteria that do not necessarily ensure a good quality food (e.g. price, ingredients, size of the company). It's important to use more objective criteria (science, quality control) in judging a dog food.

Be skeptical of grand claims or easy answers to difficult problems. Remember the old adage: if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

If you are a critical web surfer and work with your veterinarian to analyze the information you find, you will reap the benefits of the computer age without experiencing its problems.

Below are the web addresses of some useful, accurate sources of information on nutrition:

Nutrition Guidelines

- World Small Animal Veterinary Association Nutritional Assessment Guidelines <http://www.wsava.org/educational/global-nutrition-committee>
- American Animal Hospital Association Nutritional Assessment Guidelines <https://www.aahanet.org/Library/NutritionalAsmt.aspx>

Tools for the Veterinary Healthcare Team

- World Small Animal Veterinary Association Global Nutrition Committee Nutrition Toolkit <http://wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit>
- Pet Nutrition Alliance – information and tools to increase awareness of the importance of optimal pet nutrition <http://www.petnutritionalliance.org>

Pet Nutrition – General Information for Pet Owners

- National Research Council downloadable booklet: Your Dog's Nutritional Needs <http://dels-old.nas.edu/banr/petdoor.html>

Pet Food

- Association of American Feed Control Officials: Information on regulations, labeling and other important facts about pet food <http://petfood.aafco.org/>
- FAQs about pet foods www.tufts.edu/vet/nutrition/faq/general_pet_nutrition.html
- Federal Drug Administration (FDA) Pet Food site: Information, links, food safety issues, recalls, pet food labels, reporting portal <http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/Products/AnimalFoodFeeds/PetFood/default.htm>
- Pet Food Institute: Information on ingredient definitions, labeling regulations <http://www.petfoodinstitute.org/Index.cfm?Page=Consumers>
- Pet Food Report: Consumer's Guide to Pet Food www.petfoodreport.com

Nutrition Consultations

- American College of Veterinary Nutrition: Listing of board-certified veterinary nutritionists who will conduct nutritional consultations for veterinarians and/or pet owners www.acvn.org
- European College of Veterinary and Comparative Nutrition: Board-certified veterinary nutritionists in Europe www.esvcn.com

Home-cooked Diets

- American College of Veterinary Nutrition: Listing of board-certified veterinary nutritionists who will formulate nutritionally balanced homemade diet recipes for veterinarians and/or pet owners www.acvn.org
- BalanceIT: Commercial website which offers semi-customized balanced home-cooked diet recipes for pet owners with healthy pets. Veterinarians can customize pre-formulated recipes for animals with medical conditions www.balanceit.com
- European College of Veterinary and Comparative Nutrition: Board-certified veterinary nutritionists in Europe www.esvcn.com

Obesity

- Pet Obesity Prevention: Useful information on assessing pets' body weight, calorie needs, and weight loss tools www.petobesityprevention.com

Dietary Supplements

- Consumerlab: Site (with a small subscription fee for use) that independently evaluates dietary supplements (primarily for human supplements but some pet supplements are included) www.consumerlab.com
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA): Regulatory and safety issues of dietary supplements, adverse event reporting <http://www.fda.gov/food/DietarySupplements/default.htm>
- Mayo Clinic drugs and supplements information: Fact sheets on human supplements and herbs <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/drug-information/DrugHerbIndex>
- National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Dietary Supplements: Evaluating supplements, fact sheets, safety notices, internet health info <http://ods.od.nih.gov>
- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Information Center: General supplement and nutrition information, links to a variety of dietary supplement websites http://fnic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=4&tax_level=1&tax_subject=274
- United States Pharmacopeia Dietary Supplement Verification Program: Independent testing of dietary supplements (human supplements only) <http://www.usp.org/usp-verification-services/usp-verified-dietary-supplements>

Raw meat diets

- Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine raw diet fact sheet http://www.tufts.edu/vet/nutrition/resources/raw_meat_diets.pdf
- FDA guidance document on safe handling and raw foods <http://www.fda.gov/downloads/AnimalVeterinary/GuidanceComplianceEnforcement/GuidanceforIndustry/UCM052662.pdf>

Other

- Ohio State Indoor Pet Initiative: Nutrition and other tips for optimizing the indoor pet's environment <http://indoorpet.osu.edu/>
- USDA Nutrient Database: Full nutrient profiles on thousands of human foods <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search>

