

Profusion of pet food choices cooks up confusion: FAQ

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Q: I've owned pets all my life, but I'm more confused than ever about the healthiest food for dogs and cats. How do I choose among all the options?

A: The simple answer to this question is, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. If your pets are doing well on their current diet, there is no need to change. Do not let the advertisements fool you.

If you are choosing a food for a new pet or you must change your pet's diet (perhaps because of a pet food recall), I recommend feeding the highest quality of food that you can afford. What is a high-quality diet? This is almost impossible to decipher without contacting the manufacturer and analyzing every nutrient source in their product. For most pet owners, this is impractical, but for those who wish to pursue this route, the World Small Animal Veterinary Association has an excellent, unbiased (I think) set of questions to ask a manufacturer. (See page six of this [document](#).)

An easier route is to ask your veterinarian. It is best to make dietary decisions on an individual basis rather than say "All Chihuahuas should eat diet X, Y or Z."

In selecting brands, I generally like the major manufacturers, not because they are necessarily better than the smaller companies but because they are readily available. So when you run out of food on Sunday evening, you likely will be able to pick up more food without having to abruptly change your pet's diet. Your pet's gastrointestinal system becomes used to digesting a certain type of food; an abrupt change can lead to vomiting and diarrhea. We recommend transitioning to a new diet over the course of one to two weeks.

When browsing options, look for and read the nutritional adequacy statement (NAS). This will tell you if 1) the food claims to be complete and balanced; 2) which life stage it is intended to support; and 3) the method used to substantiate the "complete and balanced" claim. Foods that are not labeled as treats yet do not provide essential nutrients in sufficient quantities must have an NAS that says, "This product is intended for intermittent or supplemental feeding only."

Nutritional guidelines for pet food are established by the Association of American Feed Control Officials, or [AAFCO](#).

Q: Tell me more about AAFCO. Are its standards credible — that is, free of commercial influence?

A: AAFCO is a commonly misunderstood entity. It is not a regulatory agency nor a governmental body, though members of the government do participate in AAFCO. AAFCO has no power to monitor or enforce its guidelines and model regulations, which are not laws unless or until individual states adopt them. Animal feed laws fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and individual states.

AAFCO provides guidance on feed ingredient definitions and labeling requirements. It sets standards for determining the energy density of feeds and substantiation of “complete and balanced” claims. I tend not to be concerned about whether it is affected by commercial influence, because everything is. (Unless the brand you are feeding was given away free, it, too, is influenced commercially.) My perception is that AAFCO guidelines are minimum standards. If a pet food company doesn’t even take the time to follow AAFCO guidelines, I would recommend avoiding it.

Q: How can eating the exact same thing in kibble form day after day be healthy?

A: If the kibble is complete and balanced, then your pet is getting everything it needs from a nutritional standpoint. Certainly you should mix in a few treats (in moderation) for enrichment, but eating the same food is perfectly healthy.

In fact, as a bit of health nut myself, I try to eat the same thing for breakfast and lunch every single day. I eat a variety at dinner only because my wife does not want to eat the same thing over and over.

Q: Could a food be a poor choice for a neighbor's pet but not mine?

A: Absolutely. Every animal is different. Each individual (even within the same breed or the same litter, for that matter) has a unique metabolism. Some pets will be allergic to certain ingredients, while others may not. And then there are lifestyle differences. If your pet is constantly going for runs, and maybe does some agility training, it may need a more calorically dense food than your neighbor’s pet that may live a more sedentary lifestyle. Some pets may thrive on what I would consider a low-quality food, and I have seen dogs become obese while being fed high-quality foods.

I often use the example of one of my employees. She eats candy all day long and manages to maintain an ideal body weight, while I spend every lunch hour at the gym and have to watch what I eat very carefully to maintain a healthy body weight. We all have different metabolisms and different nutritional needs; our pets are no different.

Q: Is there a real quality difference between expensive and cheap foods? In pet food, do you get what you pay for?

A: Yes and no. Some very expensive foods are not very high quality, and some cheaper foods are fairly high quality.

Q: The FDA advises people to wash their hands after handling pet food. Why is it safe for my pet to eat something that I should treat as a contaminant?

A: The FDA is following the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [guidelines](#), which recommend we wash our hands after touching our pets or their food. This is a good idea, as pet foods may contain bacteria that could cause illness in people.

Q: Should I look for foods described as "human grade"? Does that mean that the food is something I could safely eat?

A: No. Your pets are not people. They do not need "human grade" food. Also, human food, too, gets recalled from time to time, so being manufactured as if for human consumption does not necessarily make the product any safer for your pet.

I have a similar aversion to the terms "holistic" and "premium." The terms are unregulated, and to my mind, any company that uses them cares more about marketing than quality.

Q: Are meat byproducts to be avoided, in your opinion? Why or why not?

A: There is absolutely nothing wrong with meat byproducts. The term sounds bad, so companies use it in advertising in order to charge a lot more for "byproduct free" foods, when those foods actually may be nutritionally deficient compared with foods containing byproducts.

AAFCO defines meat byproducts as "Nonrendered nonmeat (not striated muscle) including but not limited to lungs, spleens, kidney, brains, livers, blood, bone, fatty tissue and stomach and intestines without contents; does not include hair, horns, teeth or hoofs."

Livers and kidneys are highly nutritious organ meats. And if you ever watch a *Nature* show, you will see that the first thing a lion or wolf goes after is the organs. Byproducts often have far more nutritional value than "real meat," but because pet food companies have spent tens of millions of dollars convincing pet owners that byproducts are bad, people tend not to believe me. Even some of my own students still think byproducts are bad. It's hard to counter good advertising.

Q: What's the deal with grain-free?

A: MARKETING, MARKETING, MARKETING. Pure and simple, marketing so companies can charge more money for food your pet probably does not need. I remember a few years ago when grain-free first came out, various representatives from food companies would come to the hospital and explain to us why their food was still good even though it had grain, and they would have all this research showing that grain is perfectly safe. A few years later, those same companies came out with grain-free diets. Why? Because they sold well. It had nothing to do with what was good for the pet. Of course, grain-free is not harmful either, so if someone wants to pay an extra \$20 for a bag of food, that is quite all right.

Grain-free often is marketed as a good diet for pets with dermatologic conditions. Oftentimes, owners will tell me that their pets' allergies cleared up after switching to a grain-free diet. While I absolutely believe that their allergies did improve, it is far more likely that their pet was allergic to chicken or beef; the main protein in the grain-free product is likely lamb or fish. Are some pets allergic to grains? Absolutely. But beef allergies are far more common. Again, the best advice is to feed your pet its current diet as long as it is doing well on it.

Q: What's the difference between chemical preservatives and natural preservatives?

A: A few years ago, chemical preservatives got a bad name when products such as BHT and BHA became associated with kidney disease or cancer. I do not know if these claims are true. Regardless, today most manufacturers use more natural preservatives such as Vitamin C and Vitamin E. Using vitamins as preservatives is more expensive, but if it makes people more comfortable, I am all for it.

Q: Is food coloring unhealthy?

A: Food coloring is perfectly safe to eat, but the use of it in pet foods is completely unnecessary. It is added to make the product look appealing to the people buying the food. To me, this suggests the company is more focused on marketing, and not necessarily on what is best for your pet.

Q: What are signs that a food isn't right for my pet?

A: If your pet is overweight, has loose stools, persistent flatulence or a poor coat (oily, dull, dry, flaky, etc.), you should consider switching food. This should be done only after consulting your veterinarian, as any of those conditions also could be indicative of a medical problem.

Q: What do you feed your pets?

A: I feed my cats Hill's Metabolic Advanced. Both of my cats are overweight (they learned to wake up the kids if I don't feed them at night), but they have at least stopped gaining weight since I made the switch. I also am a lazy pet owner, and I like the convenience of a dry cat food.

Q: What about homemade pet food? Is it difficult to provide a complete diet for a dog or cat when making its meals yourself?

A: Homemade pet foods can work, and some of them work very well. It comes down to what the pet's owner wants and has the time to do. Making a balanced diet at home should be done only under the supervision of a veterinary nutritionist. The most important thing to remember is to not cut corners or substitute items. Doing so could leave your pet with a nutritional deficiency. With cats, make sure they're getting enough taurine – without this amino acid, cats will die. Recipes for homemade pet diets are available. Before using one, I would recommend having it assessed for nutritional adequacy.

Q: What is the relationship between pet food companies and veterinary students and veterinarians? Should I worry whether my veterinarian is profiting from the sales of a particular brand or brands of food?

A: Should you worry? Yes and no. This is a very difficult dilemma. Yes, companies such as Hills and Purina sponsor a lot of continuing education on nutrition for veterinarians, and yes, veterinary students are often given gifts by these large companies. (I still use the backpack Hill's gave away my first semester of veterinary school.)

But does this mean veterinarians will automatically recommend their products? Well honestly, it depends on your veterinarian. I would say the vast, vast, vast majority of us (probably 99.9 percent) recommend food based on what we believe is best for your pet. As much I like my Hill's backpack and my Purina pens, those trinkets cannot buy my integrity. Veterinarians read studies that these companies produce, and we are trained to recognize a good study from a bad one.

And what of profiting? Well, this is a business. So yes we (at least hospital owners) make money on selling pet foods. But guess what — so does Walmart, so does the pet store, so does every other person in the pet industry. The same pet food representatives who give veterinarians freebies are also giving stuff away to pet store owners and their employees. So the question becomes, whom do you want to get your information from, the high school senior working at the pet store, or your veterinarian?

If you are worried about conflicts of interest, ask your veterinarian about alternatives to the food sold in the hospital. There usually are similar foods out there, and most of us will gladly tell you this. Food revenue makes up a very small portion of our operating income. I'd much rather recommend a food that I do not sell than risk losing the trust of a client.