

Why are we so choosy about the foods & treats we carry?

An introduction to nutrition for companion animals

by Barbara Troyer

It all comes down to what is healthy for your pet

At Bend Pet Express we are dedicated to helping you find the most nutritious diet for your companion animal. From among the thousands of pet foods that are available, we choose only a small percentage: about 15 different brands of dog and cat foods.

Why are we so choosy? Because many of the pet foods out there are full of unhealthy ingredients. When considering a food to carry, we investigate. We carefully read ingredient panels. We find out about the manufacturing practices of the company that makes the food, and discover where their ingredients come from. We constantly evaluate the latest nutritional news to separate real data from popular trends. And we look for foods that we are happy to feed our own pets.

As a result, we've developed some tough criteria for foods that we offer. Most premium pet foods that we carry meet the following quality standards.

Based on high quality animal protein. Animal proteins tend to be more appetizing and digestible than plant proteins and offer a wider variety of essential and nonessential amino acids. This is especially important for cats, which are obligate carnivores. This means that they must have meat in their diet to survive, as they can't synthesize certain vitamins and enzymes from plant sources. Dogs evolved as opportunistic carnivores and can survive as omnivores, which means they can eat a wider variety of animal and plant proteins to maintain their health. It is important to learn to interpret labels on the foods you feed your pets. The first thing you should know is that ingredients are listed by weight on the ingredients

panel. Whole meats (chicken, turkey, etc.) while a good protein source, contain a lot of water weight which can bump them to the top of the ingredients list, making the food seem to contain higher amounts of animal protein than it really does. That is why we also like to see chicken "meal" (or turkey meal, etc.) high on the ingredients list: meal is meat with most of the water removed. (Avoid the generic term "meat meal" however, as there is no way of knowing what it actually contains). Also, it can be misleading to rely solely on the listed protein percentage. Many foods that at first glance appear to be high in protein are not high in animal protein—the proteins come from other less nutritious sources such as corn gluten. Please note: Although both dogs and cats can eat cooked grains, neither of them needs grains for a healthy diet. We now offer several pet foods with high animal protein levels and no grains—a great choice for your pet.

Human grade ingredients, from whole food sources: Whole vegetables, fruits, & grains. Whole foods are the most nutritious—for you and your pet. Because ingredients are listed by weight on the ingredients panel, whole foods sometimes give a better picture of what is in the food; some manufacturers, for instance, will fraction grains (listing the parts out separately; i.e. brewer's rice, rice bran, rice flour) to make the food seem like it has less grain overall, when actually the grain products when added together may weigh more than the protein source.

Additionally, many pet food manufacturers are now realizing that phytochemicals, nutraceuticals, antioxidants, and enzymes benefit pets as well as people. These disease-

fighting compounds can be found in whole foods. Phytochemicals (or phytonutrients) are non-nutritive substances in plants that possess health-protective effects. Nutraceuticals are



specific chemical compounds in food, including vitamins and additives, which may aid in preventing disease. Many phytochemicals impart bright colors to fruits and vegetables and as antioxidants have the ability to scavenge free radicals—damaging compounds formed by various body functions or taken in from the environment. Enzymes are

found abundantly in fresh, minimally processed natural foods and play an important role in food digestion. As the cooking process destroys many of these compounds, forward thinking pet food manufacturers are finding ways to include them in their raw state in processed diets using freeze-dried coatings, and in raw food blends. You can supplement by adding fresh vegetables and fruits to your pet's diet such as finely juiced or chopped broccoli, leafy greens, peas, and carrots.

No meat or poultry by-products, or meat and bone meal. The quality of by-products used for pet foods is very difficult to determine. By-products can legally include: spoiled meat from the supermarket, road kill that can't be buried on the roadside, the "4 D's" of cattle: dead, dying, disease and disabled, heads, feet, feathers, hair, hooves, horns, rancid restaurant grease, and euthanized companion animals. These items are not very fun to contemplate and not a very good source of nutrition for your pet. ^{1 2}

No fat or protein not identified by species. "Animal fat is a euphemism for a low-quality, low-priced mix of fats of uncertain origin." ¹ It is preferable to see a high quality ingredient listed like "chicken fat."



Free of common allergens or cheap fillers: No corn, no wheat, no soy. Soybean meal, wheat or wheat middlings, corn gluten meal, corn meal, whole/crushed corn, and maize are often used as a cheap source of protein. These products are not readily digestible and can cause allergies.

No added fiber sources: Fiber should come from human grade whole foods. Added fiber sources include beet pulp (dried residue from sugar beets) and powdered cellulose (from fibrous plant materials). It would be preferable to see the fiber source coming from whole fruits, vegetables, and grains.

No artificial colors, flavors, preservatives, or added sweeteners. No ethoxyquin, BHA (Butylated hydroxyanisole), BHT (Butylated hydroxytoluene), or propylene glycol. The fat in dry foods has to be preserved against spoiling. However, foods can be naturally preserved with Vitamin E (tocopherols), Vitamin C (ascorbic acid), and rosemary extract, etc. All meat should come from U.S. controlled sources, so preservatives

for long-term storage are not necessary. Lamb meal and chicken meal from other countries is acceptable, because it is essentially dehydrated and does not have to be preserved. Please keep in mind that “some ingredients—usually fats, and some fish products—arrive at the pet food factory containing artificial preservatives; these do not have to be disclosed on the ingredient list, since the maker did not add them.”¹

Fixed Formula: Same ingredients used every time. “Fixed formula” foods always use the same ingredients. However, some foods, including many grocery store brands, are produced with whatever ingredients are cheapest at the time and the ingredients may change significantly from batch to batch.

So what is the best food to feed my pet? Unfortunately, there is no such thing as the perfect food for your pet. Nutritional needs vary by species, breed, age, health, and activity level. The best thing you can do for your pet is to learn to read labels. By following our guidelines above you will be well informed in choosing several diets to rotate through that will work for your pet. And we are here to work with you to choose an appropriate diet for your pet.



Should I choose one food and stick with it? – Rotation philosophy. Just as it is healthy for you, your companion animals should eat a wide variety of foods. Unless your pet has allergies or other health issues that have limited their diet, it is a great idea to rotate their protein source often—at least every few months, even if you switch premium brands to do it. Pet nutrition is an evolving science and as yet unknown nutritional deficiencies or inadvertent nutritional imbalances of one food may be avoided or corrected by utilizing several food sources. Transitioning slowly to the new food over a week will help to avoid intestinal upset (start with ¼ new food to ¾ old—for more information, please see our Feeding Guidelines handout). In general we have found that the most digestible proteins in order of digestibility are: chicken, turkey, lamb, duck, fish, bison, and beef, but of course you will need to experiment to see which ones your pet will thrive on.

Should I feed table scraps? The “complete and balanced” myth. Many of us have heard never to feed our pets anything other than manufactured pet food, as it will throw off the nutritional balance of the food. However, if it makes sense for us to eat a variety of fresh foods, then it makes sense for our companion animals. Prior to the growth of the pet food industry, most pets were fed table scraps to little ill effect. If you have healthy eating habits, it is OK to occasionally share some of your meals with your pets, especially raw vegetables as mentioned above. Remember to avoid foods high in sugars, fats, or sodium though. And avoid foods commonly known to be toxic to pets, like chocolate, onions, raisins, grapes, and avocados, etc. For a more comprehensive list, please see our Fall 2005 newsletter online at: bendpetexpress.com or visit the ASPCA website: aspc.org.

Can I feed my pet bones or raw meat? In our experience it is OK to feed raw meat and bones to your companion animals. While cooked bones may splinter, raw



bones generally do not, and are a great source of nutrition for your pet. We have several raw meat diets available that include a balanced amount of vegetables and fruits, and are another great choice for your pet. Please ask any of us if you have questions about feeding raw.

Why don't you carry “X Brand” pet food? There are certainly other good pet foods on the market today that we may not carry. We select foods with unique formulations that are not readily available elsewhere in the area, and we may choose not to carry another quality food that has very similar ingredients. In addition to looking for the healthiest foods we can find, we also look for the best alternatives available at different price levels. We are constantly re-evaluating the foods we carry, and we welcome your suggestions.

How do I avoid causing intestinal upset like diarrhea in my pet? Please ask for our Feeding Guidelines handout.

Please feel free to ask any Bend Pet Express staff member if you have any questions that we haven't covered here. Of course, the information, experience, and opinions we offer shouldn't be a substitute for a visit to your animal's veterinarian.

Endnotes:

¹ The Whole Dog Journal. Vol. 9 No 2. Feb. 2006.

² The Truth About Pet Food: <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Spring04/Perhach/PetFood/Contents.htm>

Additional References:

Pet Food: The Lowdown on Labels: http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/2001/301_pet.html

AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials): <http://www.aafco.org>

AAFCO Definitions of Dog Food Ingredients: <http://www.poochnet.com/articles/aafco.htm>

Evaluation of meat meal, chicken meal, and corn gluten meal as dietary sources of protein in dry cat food. Can J Vet Res. 2005 October; 69(4): 299–304. <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1250243>

Food Pets Die For. Martin, Ann. NewSage Press, 2003.

Cats Are Different: Find out how a cat's nutritional needs are different from a dog's. Dunn, Jr., DVM, T.J.: <http://www.thepetcenter.com/temptop/catsaredif.html>

Dog photos by www.bendpetography.com

Cat photo by Barbara Brandt

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