

# You Are What You Eat

## (and your pets are, too)

### A simple guide to pet nutrition

Pet food, like most things these days, has become an industry. Everything is ground up, watered down, processed, preserved, baked, canned, bagged, and shipped; all you have to do is walk into your local grocery store or pet supply store, grab the bag with the prettiest label, and think nothing of it. But should you? Does that eye-catching wrapping, or those television commercials with happy pets romping through cascading meat and veggies really mean that what's inside the bag is great quality food? All too often, the answer is no, and tragic events like the deaths of countless pets that ate melamine-tainted, fatal foods that were sold in the United States and across the world in 2007 are a somber reminder of that fact. Your pet is what he eats, and you should know what that is if you want to keep him healthy and playing like a youngster to a ripe old age. That's where we come in: we're here to help you make sense of the confusing lists of vague ingredients, and figure out what is actually a good quality food for your pet.

All pet foods are not created equal; in fact, there are some serious discrepancies that exist between even a decent quality food and the average store-brand bag you can pull off the shelf. There are different nutritional values in different pet food ingredients, just like there are with the foods you eat: one pet food might be the equivalent of a hot-dogs-and-pizza diet, while another is closer to the fresh-meats-and-veggies diet. But the pet food industry has a much nastier side than a simple case of poor nutrition. While the Food and Drug Administration dictates that all ingredients that go into pet food must be "pure and wholesome," some of the protein sources it allows are anything but. The key to protecting your pet from unhealthy or even fatal foods is being able to read all those vague, undefined ingredients that show up on the label and know what you're getting into; and that's where we come in! Keep reading, and we'll fill you in on the Good, the Bad, and the downright Disgusting in the pet food industry.

#### The Good

These are the things that you really want to see on that pet food label. The bulk of a pet food is made up by the first ten ingredients on the ingredients list, so look for foods with as many of these guys in the top ten as possible.

- **Whole meats:** These are things listed as "chicken," or "lamb," or "salmon," and not followed up by the mysterious "by-product" distinction. This is the good stuff; it's a high

quality protein source, and you know exactly what's going into the food.

- **Meat meal:** Meat meal is a step away from whole meat; again, you want to see a specific kind of meat designated: "chicken meal," for example. That "meal" designation means that the meat has been ground to a particulate size and dehydrated before it's weighed and added to foods. Because it's dehydrated before weighing, you're actually getting more protein from a "meal" than from a whole meat. There's a little give-and-take there, but overall a specific meat meal is a good thing to see on a label. You do have to be a little careful with this one, though; you never want to purchase a food with an undefined "meat meal" in it, because if they can't tell you what animal it came from, you probably don't want to know. Another thing to be careful about is making the distinction between something like "chicken meal" and something called "meat and bone meal." Meat and bone meal not only doesn't specify what animal it comes from, but also is mostly comprised of ground bone. It is not something you want to put on your pet's plate.
- **Eggs:** Eggs are a great, healthy source of protein, and are a definite plus.
- **Fish oil:** This is the single best fat source you can find in a pet food. Fish oil is rich in Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids, which are excellent for heart health, and if that wasn't enough of an

incentive, they also do wonders for skin health, ear health, and shedding.

- **Flaxseed oil:** Same basic deal as fish oil, just a little bit less tasty to your average pet. Still rich in Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids, and also a great quality fat source.
- **Fruits:** Most people tend to think of their pets as carnivores, but even cats benefit from the fiber and vitamins in fruit. A good food might list blueberries, cranberries, and apples. Vegetables and greens are a good sign, too: look for carrots and alfalfa.
- **Potatoes or sweet potatoes:** Forget the low-carb mentality, these two are a fantastic source of carbohydrates for pets.
- **Barley:** Almost all pet foods contain grains; if you have to see a grain in the top ten ingredients, barley is a good one. It's easy to digest and doesn't cause allergies.
- **Rice or whole grain rice:** Another good grain option, rice is high in fiber and easy to digest. Be careful, though, "rice flour" and "rice bran" are not the same as rice; these ingredients are made from the low-quality leftovers after the whole rice has been removed.
- **Oatmeal:** Like barley and rice, if you've got to feed grains, oatmeal is a good one to feed.

## The Bad

These ingredients should throw up red flags, especially if you see them in the "top ten" on the list. Most of them are signs that a brand of food is made from cheap, low-quality ingredients.

- **Brewer's rice:** If you're having flashbacks to your college drinking days, you're on the right track. Brewer's rice is what's left over from the brewing process. It is devoid of any nutritional value, but is included in pet foods because it is extremely cheap (you get what you pay for). Brewer's rice basically just takes up space that would be better filled with any of the ingredients above.
- **Corn meal:** This one is a huge culprit in almost all commercial pet foods. Corn meal is what is left over when the best parts have been removed; it's extremely difficult for animals (and people) to digest, has no nutritional value, and frequently

causes serious allergies. Like brewer's rice, it's just a filler – it's just there to take up space.

- **Wheat:** This is one to avoid at all costs. Wheat is useless for pets and like corn meal frequently causes allergies, especially in dogs. "Wheat middlings" are especially bad, as they consist of whatever gets swept off the floor after the wheat has been processed. Not something you should put into your pet.
- **Meat and bone meal:** As mentioned above (see the info on meat meals), this is not to be confused with something like "chicken meal," which is a high-quality source of protein. Meat and bone meal is a by-product of the rendering process, and has been credited with the spread of mad cow disease among cattle; not something anyone should be ingesting, whether they're a human or a pet. It's frequently used as a replacement for coal, which should tell you something about its nutritional value.
- **Beef fat:** Beef fat is another fat source, but it lacks any of the nutritional value of the flaxseed and fish oils listed above. It's the same white, waxy fat that you cut off your steak before you eat it, or the layer of grease you wipe off the burger. It's bad for you, and it's bad for your pets.
- **Sugar or corn syrup:** If you're seeing these on the ingredients list, red flags should be waving frantically all over your brain. The only purpose these ingredients serve is to convince the animal that an otherwise unpalatable food tastes good enough to eat. They are frequently used to disguise the more sinister "protein sources" that fall into the "Disgusting" category.
- **Salt:** If loading up on salt is bad for you, why would it be good for your pet?
- **Soybeans:** Soy in pet foods is a way to cheaply (and artificially) up the protein content without actually providing the animal with protein it can use. It's hard for pets to digest, and frequently causes allergies.

## The Downright Disgusting

This category is not for the faint of heart, but if you own a pet, you absolutely need to read it. We should state up front that none of these claims are fictional;

there is a long history of recalled pet food for all of the reasons detailed below.

- **Meat by-product:** When we say meat here, we're indicating that they can actually tell you what animal the by-product comes from: "chicken by-product" is a common one. What "by-product" means is that what's going into the food can't really be qualified as meat. With chickens, it's chiefly beaks and feet; there's also blood, feathers, and organs. If you see "by-product" anywhere on the label, do not buy the food.
- **Animal by-product:** If the last one seemed a bit nasty, this one takes things several steps further. "Animal" means that any of several unsavory things could be going into your pet food. There have been documented cases of horrendous ingredients - pest animals like rats and mice, roadkill, and diseased animals,

including meat from cows "downed" by Mad Cow disease, just to name a few – going into what the pet food industry dubs "animal by-product." Tumors have been used as a protein source. But the most gruesome incidents have involved recalls of pet foods due to the inclusion of euthanized cats and dogs in their products. If the importance of choosing a good quality pet food seemed exaggerated until this point, understand that by buying low-quality food you may actually be causing your pet to ingest euthanasia agents. This ingredient is one of the reasons that people who know pet food insist that feeding a poor-quality food will take years off your pet's life.

- **Animal digest:** Take all of the revolting things that go into animal by-product, and include the stomach contents and skin of the animal after it was slaughtered.

With all of this information in hand, choose your next pet food carefully. Nutrition is your single best line of defense to keep your pet happy and healthy for years to come. Even if he seemed to be getting along fine before, you'll be able to see the difference a good diet makes within a matter of weeks. Good food means a healthy heart, a healthy digestive system, and healthy skin: no more diarrhea and vomiting, no more scratching and hot spots, and a glossier, dandruff-free coat that sheds less. Your pets will be more energetic, because they're actually getting the protein and nutrients their bodies need. You'll see weight loss and muscle gain. You'll be spared expensive treatments and surgeries to correct urinary crystals, which are especially problematic in male cats. And if the extra expense of a bag of good quality pet food makes you frown, remember this: because all of the protein and nutrients that your pet needs are in the food, he will eat less – sometimes half as much as he was before – and over the course of a year you will save money not only on pet food, but also on vet bills and medicine. And the cherry on top of it all? When your animal eats less, there's less poop for you to pick up. If that doesn't make you happy, nothing will. 🐾