

# Important information you could be misreading on the pet food label

Have you ever found yourself comparing dog food labels and wishing that the information could be clear, more like human “Nutrition Facts” labels? We can assure you that we, and pretty much every other dog owner, feel the same way. Unfortunately, most of the information on a dog food label is useless or murky—or even absent! Today’s pet food labels have little resemblance to the labels that we’re used to seeing on our own foods.

While they must meet regulatory guidelines, pet food labels generally fail miserably at providing the information that every pet owner and veterinarian is actually looking for: is this the best food to feed to my pet (or patient)? It will take regulatory changes to change this state of affairs. These are underway, but progress may be slow. Pet owners shouldn’t expect changes any time soon.

Most pet owners must rely on guesswork when they’re roaming the food aisles of a pet store or supermarket. “Does this one sound like it tastes good?” “If this one sounds nutritious for humans, then it must be good for my dog, right?” “Does it matter if this cat food is “organic” or “heritage” or “wild”?” As a result, studies show that most owners base their pet food decisions on impulse and advertising, not facts.

I’m not surprised. While it’s relatively simple to figure out what’s in a food, it takes some detective work to figure out whether that food is actually nutritious and right for your pet. Unfortunately, most owners base their decisions on marketing, rather than on objective nutritional information. Although there are limitations to the information provided on a pet food label, the label can provide important information to help in selecting foods.

## Marketing Mishaps

As a scientist, we pride ourselves on being objective and sticking to the facts. Yet the sad truth is that there are very few useful facts on a pet food label. The vast majority of the text and all of the images on any pet food packaging is advertising. It’s aimed at appealing to you, the owner. Sometimes, something that attracts you is good for your pet, but many times, it’s not. Current regulations do not require pet food companies to provide much factual information on their labels. They want to make the food sound delicious and high quality to get your attention. Oh yes, and they need to make a profit. Always remember when you’re in the pet food aisle: Just ‘cause they say it, doesn’t make it so.

Commercial dog food companies aren’t generally evil. Nor do we believe in the many pet food conspiracy theories popular on the Internet. There are companies that produce foods of fantastic quality and those that cut corners or spend most of their money on marketing. Just because a pet food company is large doesn’t mean it’s using substandard ingredients, or tricking people into buying too much food. And just because a company is small, or “artisanal,” or “makes its food with love,” doesn’t mean it necessarily manufactures more wholesome dog food.

In fact, our research suggests exactly the opposite often is true for both scenarios. You have to judge each case, each pet food, on its merits. The next time you find yourself in the pet food aisle, ask yourself: Does this food sound like something I’d order in a fancy restaurant? Is this label or the company’s other marketing material trying to make me feel panicky or paranoid about my pet’s health? Is this label making pie-in-the-sky claims? If so, proceed carefully.

If this all sounds hopeless, don’t despair. There are ways to decode a pet food label; it’s just that most pet owners look in all the wrong places. Nearly every day, we encounter dog owners who tell me that the first thing they look at on a dog label is the ingredient list. That’s what we all do when we’re shopping for human food. However, it’s not the right approach when deciding upon a pet food. Even so, most publications and websites that offer ratings of specific pet foods base their recommendations heavily, or entirely, on the ingredient list. Our main use for the ingredient list is to look for anything that should not be fed to a pet, like ingredients which are toxic or ingredients that are used only for marketing purposes and not for their nutritional value.

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# The Pet Food Label's Most Useful Information - Finding the Nutrition

Instead of starting with the less-than-useful ingredient list to make a decision on pet food, go to the two most useful pieces of information on a pet food label. One of these is the "Nutritional Adequacy statement." This may also be called the "AAFCO statement" because it is based on the nutritional profiles that the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) publishes annually.

All pet foods sold across state lines must print one of three statements clearly on the package. These statements answer these important questions:

- Does the diet contain all the essential nutrients that a pet needs?
- How that was determined?
- For which age or life stage is the diet appropriate?

Pull out your pet's food and look for the statement on the label. These statements are typically written in very small font on the back of the bag or can (or on the side in the fold). They may be difficult to find. It's worth looking for, though, as this little bit of information can be really valuable. It should look like one of the following:

1. Product X is formulated to meet AAFCO nutrient profiles for Y species and Z life stage. Life stages include "maintenance," or "growth and reproduction," which is frequently called "all life stages". All life stages means it meets growth/reproduction requirements in which case it will automatically meet adult requirements because a puppy or kitten has higher calorie and nutrient requirements than do adults.
2. Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that Product X provides complete and balanced nutrition for Y species, and Z life stage. Life stages for feeding tests include "maintenance," "growth," "gestation and lactation" (pregnancy and nursing), or "all life stages." (The latter means they've done feeding trials for both gestation and growth.)
3. This product is intended for intermittent and supplemental feeding only.

If your pet's label had one of the first two examples, good news, it's nutritionally complete and balanced. However, if your label had the third statement then that food is not meeting all of your dog's nutritional needs. The one exception to this is if your pet is eating a veterinary diet used to manage a medical condition. Some of these veterinary diets are specifically designed this way to help manage a medical condition. However, for diets purchased over-the-counter, you definitely want it to have all the nutrients your dog or cat needs to stay healthy.

Remember this caveat, though: if the food is complete and balanced—examples 1 and 2 above—that means that it is supposed to contain minimum levels of all the nutrients that a normal, healthy pet requires (and avoids going over any maximums). It does not guarantee that the company actually tested the final product to be sure that it still had those levels (we've tested numerous pet foods from stores that do not meet AAFCO minimums). This is why it's so important to use a food made by a manufacturer with the highest nutritional expertise and the most stringent quality control measures – not just one with good marketing.

Nor does it give any indication whether the quality of the ingredients is good or bad. As we all know, there can be a big gap between "adequate" and "optimal." Again, this is why it's so important to find a manufacturer with lots of nutrition expertise. If you're still having a hard time deciphering between companies, your veterinarian or a consultation with a board-certified veterinary nutritionist can help you decide what's best for your dog or cat.

## Know Thy Manufacturer

All pet food labels must include an address to contact the manufacturer or distributor. A telephone number, email address or website address are not required. However, avoid companies that do not include at least one of these methods of contact. These days, it's unrealistic to get timely information by mail only, and we think these tricky manufacturers do that deliberately.

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Beware of foods that simply list the store as the manufacturer. Big box stores, chain pet stores, and grocery stores do not make their own pet food. Rather, they contract out the manufacturing to other companies, in a practice known as “co-packing.”

Let’s say you have a dog with a heart condition, and you want to find out how much salt is in a particular food. If you call the store’s corporate offices, they’re not going to have any clue how much salt is in each serving. More than that, they’ll probably be reluctant or unwilling to release information about the true manufacturer of the food. It’s not worth the cost savings to use a food that has a mystery manufacturer.

Knowing the facts about a pet food manufacturer (not just how persuasive their marketing is) is another key to selecting the best food for your pet. Contact the manufacturer with questions and to find out the answers to the criteria listed below.

Recommendations for selecting a commercially available pet food [Adapted from Freeman et al, Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Vol 243, No. 11, December 1, 2013 and based on the nutritional assessment guidelines published by the American Animal Hospital Association and the World Small Animal Veterinary Association:

## **Manufacturers should meet the following criteria:**

1. Own all the plant or plants where their food is manufactured.
2. Practice strict quality-control measures. Just saying the food is good quality is not enough evidence. Examples of specific measures include certification of a manufacturer’s procedures (eg, Global Food Safety Initiative, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, or American Feeding Industry Association); testing ingredients and end-products for nutrient content, pathogens, and aflatoxins; materials risk assessments; and supplier audits.
3. Employ at least 1 (hopefully more) full-time qualified nutritionist (appropriate qualifications are a PhD in animal nutrition or board-certification by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition or European College of Veterinary Comparative Nutrition).
4. Test their diets via AAFCO feeding trials. If AAFCO feeding trials are not conducted, the manufacturer should, at a minimum, ensure that diets meet AAFCO nutrient profiles through analysis of the finished product.
5. Conduct and publish research in peer-reviewed journals.
6. Be willing and able to provide exact nutritional values for any nutrient or nutrients of interest (not only the guaranteed analysis numbers, which are listed on the label, but the average [typical] analysis as well). This should ideally be provided on an energy basis (i.e., grams per 100 kilocalories or grams per 1,000 kilocalories), rather than on an as-fed or dry-matter basis (percentages), which do not account for the variation in energy density among foods.
7. Be able to provide the number of calories for any food on any requested weight or volume basis (e.g., per gram, per pound, per cup).

## **Take-Home Points**

- The AAFCO statement is one of the most important things to look for on a pet food label. It tells you 1) whether the food meets all dog nutrient requirements, 2) how that was determined, and 3) what life stage the food is truly intended for (not just who it’s marketed to).
- The manufacturer’s experience, knowledge, and quality control procedures are critical for ensuring your dog is eating a nutritious, good quality, safe food. Unfortunately, this information cannot be determined from a pet food label, unless you already have researched the manufacturer’s practices. Do your own research!
- Everything else on modern pet food labels is primarily a marketing tool for the company and provides little useful information for the dog owner.
- Ingredient lists provide little information on the nutritional value or overall quality of a dog food.

*Info courtesy of Cummings Veterinary Medical Center at Tufts University*



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