

Your Pets Are What They Eat

As we all try to find the most healthful diet, we often find ourselves caught up on fad diets, such as the Paleo, South Beach, Atkins, and Mediterranean diets. Information available is often confusing, and it is even more so when looking for diets for our pets. Here are some tips on choosing your pet's food—plus a look at some common misconceptions.

The top items to look for when searching on your own for pet food are the following: seek **established reputable companies**, use companies that have **their own manufacturing facility** (have their own phone number on the label), and choose foods that meet **AAFCO** (Association of American Feed Control Officials) **feeding trials** (look on the label). Be wary of foods for “all life stages”, as often do not take into account the differing nutritional needs of growing puppies versus senior dogs, and are therefore not recommended.

Some people believe that **home-cooked diets** are safer, more natural, or more healthful than a commercially available diet. However, these diets are likely to be nutritionally inadequate and unbalanced or use potentially pet-toxic ingredients (garlic, onions, grapes, raisins). It is also important to note that cats must eat meat, and often get very ill if their diets lack meat. Many recipes are available online or in books, but these may not be well-researched. Only prepare home-cooked diets after consulting a board-certified veterinary nutritionist. Balance It through the University of California-Davis offers consultation and free recipe ideas (see <https://secure.balanceit.com/>).

Debunking Common Myths and Misconceptions

People often pass up foods containing **animal byproducts**. These byproducts contain clean parts of slaughtered mammals (i.e. liver, lungs, heart, spleen, kidneys, and tripe). Though these parts may not seem particularly appetizing for us, they are the *crème de la crème* to our pets. Also, the protein quality of byproducts is often better than that from muscle meat alone. Byproducts are excellent sources of energy, vitamins, and minerals.

“**Meal**” is also commonly misunderstood. In processing meal, water and fat are removed from the meat. In other words, meal is a very digestible source of concentrated protein. As with all ingredients, the origin determines the quality: ‘whole meat’ can be of the same quality as ‘meat meal.’

Contrary to popular belief, most pets who are allergic to their food usually have an intolerance to beef, soy, or dairy, rather than an allergy to grain. **Grains** (corn, wheat) are excellent highly-digestible sources of quality carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and fiber (= “nutrients”). Grain-free diets substitute potato or tapioca, which contribute fewer nutrients and are harder to digest than grains. Corn is *not* a low-quality “filler”, but is in fact a high-quality source of most nutrients needed by your pet.

Raw or **B.A.R.F.** (Biologically Appropriate Raw Foods) diets are believed to mimic what cats and dogs eat ‘in the wild’. There is no scientific evidence that feeding a raw versus conventional diet is any better for your pet's health. In fact, there is ample evidence that shows these diets are often **unbalanced**, leading to nutritional deficiencies and illness. There is also a high risk of contamination of raw foods with dangerous bacteria such as *Salmonella* that may cause serious illness in pets *and* owners. Gastrointestinal problems and injury from bones also can occur with these diets. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) do not support the use of the raw diet.

Holistic or **natural** foods have no definition, no standards established by AAFCO, and thus have no regulation. The United States Department of Agriculture is developing regulations for which types of synthetic additives (i.e. vitamins) may be used in pet foods labeled as '**organic**.' However, 'organic' refers to the process of food-making rather than quality of ingredients, and flax seeds are often used instead of marine plants or fish for fatty acid sources (fatty acids improve health, skin, and joints). **Flax seeds** do *not* actually contain fatty acids; instead, they contain a precursor which is very inefficient for pets to convert and use.

Though the options for pet foods seem endless, your veterinarian is always willing to discuss the best nutrition recommendations for your pet.

For more information, visit the following links:

The Ohio State University has an excellent Nutrition Support Service (<https://vet.osu.edu/vmc/companion/our-services/nutrition-support-service>), with information on body condition, myths, choosing food, home-made diets, and more.

Tufts University's Clinical Nutrition Service (<http://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/>) has information on reading pet food labels, choosing your pet's food, and more.

The Pet Nutrition Alliance (<http://petnutritionalliance.org/>) has a great FAQ page, calorie calculator, and a wealth of other nutritional information.

The FDA (<http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/ResourcesforYou/ucm047113.htm>) has a Reading Pet Food Labels page which explains the different components of labels.