

## FYI on Pet Nutrition

Pet Nutrition has evolved dramatically over the last few decades. We have specialized diets for many medical conditions as well as diets customized for various life-stages and breeds. As a pet owner you want to provide the best nutrition you can for your pet and each brand claims to do just that. As a consumer it can be confusing to know what is accurate and what is misleading. We want this month to provide you with some facts that can help you make informed choices of diets and treats.

**AAFCO Requirements:** AAFCO is the Association of American Feed Control Officials. All commercial pet foods must meet the minimum requirements of each nutrient deemed necessary for that species. AAFCO levels do not specify quality of ingredients or maximum amounts. Diets with excess ingredients can cause health problems just as deficiencies can. (e.g. Cat foods with too much magnesium have often been faulted for causing certain urinary crystals to form in cats.)

**Protein levels & Labeling:** Most pet foods list their protein source(s) as the first ingredient. This means that prior to the product being cooked the protein source (usually meat) is the largest ingredient. But just like the hamburger you buy at a restaurant, the weight or percentage of that meat changes when cooked. The water content of the meat decreases so the meat percentage of the cooked product may not truly be the majority of the final food (e.g. A ½ pound hamburger is no longer ½ pound of meat once it is cooked).

Protein needs vary by species, age and breed. Puppies and kittens need higher levels of protein, in general. Senior cats and dogs tend to need less. Foods that are labeled as “all lifestages” may have too much protein for adults or senior pets as well as too high levels of other nutrients.

Many diets have multiple protein sources. From a veterinary stand-point multiple protein sources can be a disadvantage. If a dog or cat develops a food allergy the treatment is to switch to a diet that is either pre-digested (hydrolyzed to reduce proteins into tiny non-allergenic parts) or a “novel” protein diet which would contain a protein source that the pet has never eaten. Novel-protein diets come in more unusual proteins such as venison, duck, rabbit, egg, etc. The first novel-protein diets were predominantly “lamb & rice”. Now lamb and rice are such common over-the-counter ingredients, more exotic sources have had to be tapped (e.g. kangaroo!) and many new commercial diets combine multiple unusual sources. A diet that has perhaps “turkey, fish, venison” all in 1 food, makes the choices for an elimination trial much more limited.

**Fat:** Fat needs also vary by species, age, breed and lifestyle. Similar to humans, a less active dog requires a lower fat diet and a more active dog, a higher fat diet. One food does not fit all!

Look at the actual percentages of all the ingredients combined on a pet food label. If they do not total 100% then another source of calories or filler is present that may make up a higher percentage of the complete food.

**Organic:** The USDA specifies that an “organic” diet as contains at least 95% of its ingredients produced with no added pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, genetic engineering, radiation treatment or fertilizers. If a pet food is truly to claim that it is “organic” it has to have a stamp from the USDA declaring it as such (round green with “USDA organic” lettering on the food packaging). If there is no USDA stamp, then the product may or may not contain organic sources. Some foods say “organic” in the name, but do not have the seal. This can be misleading.

**Raw diet risks:** Raw diets have become more popular in recent years for dogs. Many owners have become leery of cooked commercial diets. The pet food scares in the last 5 years concerning contaminated ingredients may have fueled some of this concern. “Raw”, for some, means that a diet is a more natural food for a dog. Raw diets are predominantly made with raw meat. Depending on the source(s) of the meat there can be significant bacteria within the meat that can cause bacterial contamination of the dog’s living space. The bacteria may not affect the dog’s health, but they multiply within the dog’s digestive tract, acting like a big fermenting vat. This can put their owners (children especially) at high risk for such zoonotic (disease that transmits from animals to people) infections as Salmonella, Klebsiella and Campylobacter.

**Whole Prey:** Like raw diets for dogs, feeding frozen whole prey to ferrets has also become more popular. Unlike the canine raw diets, there is not a concern with zoonotic bacterial infections from the food. If, however you would choose whole prey (mice, chicks) it is a habit that must be started when the ferret is young. Once they are hooked on commercial food, switching would be extremely difficult.

**A dog is not a cat is not a ferret:** Dogs like humans are “omnivores”, which means that they can survive off a variety of food sources, both plant and animal. Claims that they are naturally carnivores only are incorrect. Their digestive tracts are designed to handle both types of food. Dogs can survive and thrive on both meat-based and vegetarian-style diets.

Cats and ferrets, on the other hand, are strict carnivores, which means that they are meat-eaters. Their digestive tracts do not process plant-based proteins and fibers well. They should be fed meat-based diets and cannot survive as vegetarians.

**Vitamin supplements:** A common question to us a veterinarians is whether a dog needs a vitamin supplement. The answer most often is “no”. Commercial diets must meet the minimum requirements of vitamins and minerals specified by AAFCO. Many may

exceed the minimum, the higher quality diets will have been researched to optimize vitamin levels. If your pet is eating a good-quality commercial diet on a regular basis then no supplementation is needed. If your pet is eating a home-cooked diet then supplements will need to be added.

As you decide what pet food is best for your pet examine the labels carefully. Remember that there are many words, pictures, colors on the package to make each food seem more appealing. What matters most is what is in the bag, not the pretty package, not the expensive TV/radio advertisement, not the push by the in-store sales representative.

If you have questions please don't hesitate to ask us. As veterinarians we want to help you make educated choices about a food that will best suit your pet.

If there are other topics related to nutrition that you would like to see addressed feel free to email us at [petvet@intermountainvet.com](mailto:petvet@intermountainvet.com)

Next month this discussion will continue with obesity and weight management