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## Frequently Asked Questions about General Pet Nutrition/Feeding

### What is the best food to feed my pet?

There is no best diet, despite all the marketing claims to the contrary. Every pet is unique and the goal is to find the best diet for the individual pet. Expense doesn't necessarily equal quality. There are some inexpensive diets that have years of rigorous scientific testing behind them and some very expensive diets that are lacking in vital nutrients or based on unsound science. Larger companies generally have more stringent quality control protocols, employ expert nutritionists and food scientists, and strive to increase our collective nutrition knowledge through research. Smaller manufacturers may have less control over ingredient quality, perform less laboratory testing and are less likely to employ full or part time veterinary nutritionists.

A good rule of thumb is that if the marketing of a product sounds too good to be true, the manufacturer cites studies or research that they cannot provide to you or makes claims that cannot be substantiated, then that's a red flag that the diet should be avoided.

### How can I pick a good diet to feed to my pet?

Your pet is an individual, and it is very likely that many food choices are available. Your veterinarian is the best source of information regarding the appropriate diet for your specific pet. Many factors are involved in choosing a food, including economics, availability, any health issues that may need to be addressed with diet, your pet's preference, and your personal philosophies.

Consumers should look for foods made by reputable companies with long histories of producing quality diets. Diets that have an Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) statement on the label saying that the diets have undergone **animal feeding trials** for the appropriate life stage are generally preferable to diets that are formulated [by computer] to meet AAFCO nutrient profiles for that life stage. This distinction is particularly important for puppy and kitten diets as well as diets produced

by newer and smaller companies with less experience in diet formulation. Ideally, manufacturers should be engaging in both internal and external (through a university for example) research to both improve their products and increase our collective nutrition knowledge. Advertisements and websites should not contain unverifiable claims, perpetuate nutrition myths or promote products solely by bashing other manufacturers' products. Most importantly, the diet you select for your pet should be the one that they do well on!

### **Is the ingredient list a good way to determine the quality of a pet food?**

Although ingredient lists are commonly used by lay people to determine the quality of pet foods, this approach has many pitfalls and is very subjective to intentional manipulation by the food manufacturers. Ingredients are listed on labels in order of weight, including water, so ingredients with high water content (like fresh meats and vegetables) are going to be listed higher than similar amounts of dry ingredients even though they may contribute fewer nutrients to the overall diet. Additionally, ingredients from the same source (such as chicken meat, chicken fat, chicken by-product meal) can be split into component parts, further complicating assessment.

Pets require nutrients, not ingredients; a diet full of great sounding ingredients can be less nutritious than a diet containing less appealing (to people) ingredients. Some manufacturers may add ingredients to diets solely for marketing purposes, to increase the appeal of the diet to consumers. These ingredients may have unproven benefits, be present in minuscule amounts and provide nothing to the diet but added expense. More ingredients also mean more quality control (and more time and expense) is necessary to ensure that the finished product adheres to the desired nutrient formulation.

It is also important to understand that the phrase human grade has no legal meaning in the pet food industry. Once a product is destined for inclusion in pet food, it is no longer fit for human consumption by definition. Moreover, ingredients sourced from the human food chain are not necessarily any more nutritious, wholesome, or safe than ingredients initially destined for pet food. Therefore, manufacturer's claims of human grade ingredients should not be over interpreted.

### **What do pet food labels like “holistic, natural, premium, and human grade” actually mean?**

Many of the terms used to describe pet foods on labels and in advertising materials are not legally defined. For example, there is no regulatory meaning for the terms holistic, premium, ultra- or super-premium, gourmet, or human grade. The term “human grade” in particular is used frequently; however, there is no official definition and pet foods are manufactured under FDA authority, and not subject to USDA inspection as are human foods. Interpretation and use of the term is variable and the definition is therefore dependent on the philosophy and marketing strategies of the individual manufacturer.

*Unlike foods for human consumption and feeds intended for food-producing animals, there are no regulations in place for “organic” pet foods at this time. Until such regulations are in place, those for human foods are being applied to pet foods.*

The term “natural” does have a legal meaning when applied to a food or ingredient, which is defined by the [Association of American Feed Control Officials](#) (AAFCO) as:

“derived solely from plant, animal or mined sources, either in its unprocessed state or having been subject to physical processing, heat processing, rendering, purification, extraction, hydrolysis, enzymolysis or fermentation, but not having been produced by or subject to a chemically synthetic process and not containing any additives or processing aids that are chemically synthetic except in amounts as might occur unavoidably in good manufacturing practices.”

AAFCO specifies that the term is used only to describe products for which all of the ingredients and components of ingredients meet this definition. An exception is made to allow the use of chemically synthesized vitamins, minerals, or other trace nutrients to allow the food to be nutritionally complete and balanced; however, a disclaimer must be present.

### **Is preparing my pet’s food at home better than buying a commercially prepared food?**

Some owners with pets that have particular health problems may wish to participate in the management of their pet’s condition by providing a home cooked diet, even if a commercially available diet would be appropriate. These owners may have a belief that a home cooked diet is safer, more natural, or more healthful than a commercially available diet. They may wish to avoid certain ingredients (such as grains, chemical preservatives, or by-products) or to include certain ingredients (such as specific protein or fat sources). Other owners wish to feed their pets according to their own philosophical views, and choose home prepared diets that are vegetarian, organic, or raw.

Another common reason owners feed a home cooked diet is when a pet refuses commercially available diets. In some pets, this is a learned behavior while in others it may be the result of a food aversion secondary to a disease condition (such as kidney failure). Finally, pets may have a particular combination of diseases for which no suitable commercial diet exists. In these cases, a home prepared diet can be an appropriate solution.

In general, home prepared diets are more expensive than commercially available diets. Of course, they are also more time consuming to prepare. There are many recipes for home prepared pet diets available on the Internet and in books; however, the vast majority of these are inadequate and unbalanced. The recipes are either vague in instruction, contain errors or omissions in formulation, incorporate potentially problematic ingredients, or feature outdated strategies for addressing specific disease conditions. They may also lack specificity about the exact amount to feed a particular size of pet. If you wish to prepare

your pet's food at home, consider getting a customized recipe and consultation with a board certified veterinary nutritionist.

### **Are commercially available diets safe to feed my pet?**

Commercially available pet foods have been used successfully for years. There are many kinds of foods available, from canned to dry. Some are complete and balanced and others are meant for supplemental or intermittent feeding. Safety problems (with regard to both nutritional adequacy and toxin/microbiological contamination) are occasionally documented in both commercial foods as well as home-prepared human foods. Most manufacturers utilize sophisticated mechanisms for quality control and food safety, including screening and reporting systems. As such, commercial foods remain a consistent, safe, and healthful option for feeding pets. It is also a lot more convenient!

### **How much should I feed my pet?**

While there are ways to calculate the assumed requirements of an average dog or cat, the exact calorie needs of any individual pet depend on genetics, environment, activity level, and life stage. It is important to keep in mind that foods vary widely in energy density, with different kibbles ranging from below 300 to more than 700 Calories per cup! The calorie content of the specific food you are using should be determined in order to avoid over- or underfeeding. In some cases, this information will be on the label of the pet food. If not, you can call the company for this information or find it on their website. The prevention of obesity is very important for maximizing the health and lifespan of your pet. You should regularly evaluate your pet to ensure a proper body condition. Your veterinarian can help you determine the proper weight for your individual pet. However, for ensuring that your pet is in optimal body condition, you should easily be able to feel the ribs, and your pet should have an hourglass shape when viewed from above.

### **I've heard that raw diets prevent and/or solve a lot of health problems in pets. Is this true?**

Despite anecdotal reports (stories from individuals rather than PROVEN scientifically) from pet owners and even some veterinarians, there is currently no evidence that raw diets offer any benefits over cooked diets. However, there is substantial evidence that these diets may be associated with dental fractures, bacterial and parasitic infections and other health concerns in pets. There is also potential risk to people, especially those that are immunocompromised such as young children, the elderly and patients receiving immune modifying drugs or who have cancer. Pets that eat contaminated raw diets have been demonstrated to shed viable pathogenic organisms in their feces and it is likely that areas that they frequent are also contaminated. As numerous recalls and some pathogen surveys in the last few years have proven, all raw meat, regardless of source, should be considered to be contaminated until proven otherwise. For these reasons, the Delta Society has banned raw fed pets from participating in their pet therapy programs.

In addition to food safety concerns, nearly all home-prepared raw diets and many commercially available raw diets are deficient in essential nutrients. It is also common for commercial raw diets to be very high in fat, which may not be tolerated by some animals.

### **Are raw diets better than canned or kibble foods?**

Raw diets, both home-prepared and commercial, have become more popular. Advocates of raw diets claim benefits ranging from improved longevity to superior oral or general health and even disease resolution (especially gastrointestinal disease). Often the benefits of providing natural enzymes and other substances that may be altered or destroyed by cooking are also cited. However, proof for these purported benefits is currently restricted to testimonials, and no published peer-reviewed studies exist to support claims made by raw diet advocates. No studies have examined differences in animals fed raw animal products to those fed any other type of diet (kibble, canned, or home cooked) with the exception of looking at the effects on digestibility. Typically raw meats (but not other uncooked foods like grains or starches) are slightly more digestible than cooked meat.

There are risks and concerns associated with the feeding of raw diets. One of these is the risk of nutritional imbalances, which is a reality for both home-prepared and commercial raw meat diets. Another important risk is related to bacterial or parasitic contamination. Of course, food poisoning is also a major concern for people, and the public health aspects of feeding raw foods to pets cannot be overlooked. Safe and proper handling of raw foods is crucial for reducing the risk, but safety cannot be guaranteed. At this time, the vast majority of purported benefits of feeding raw foods remain unproven, while the risks and consequences have been documented. It is best to discuss the choice of feeding raw foods with your veterinarian so that an informed decision can be made with regard to your pet's diet.

### **My friend says that grains are bad for dogs, is she correct?**

Whole grains, rather than being fillers, contribute valuable nutrients including vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and fiber to diets while helping to keep the fat and calories lower than if animal products were used in their place. Even refined grains such as white rice can have beneficial health implications depending on the type of diet and the pet. The vast majority of dogs (and cats!) are very efficient at digesting and utilizing nutrients from grains. While some dogs are allergic to specific grains, these allergies are no more common than allergies to animal proteins such as chicken, beef and dairy and tend to reflect the prevalence of the ingredient in commercial diets rather than enhanced antigenicity.

It is becoming more common in the saturated pet food market for manufacturers to perpetuate myths to sell diets and increase market share. Grain-free diets are often an example of this strategy. Many of these diets merely substitute highly refined starches such as those from potatoes or tapioca (cassava) in place of grains. These ingredients often provide fewer nutrients and less fiber than whole grains, while costing more.

We are starting to see more and more dogs gaining weight and even getting skin problems because of a change to a grain-free diet. While cats are true carnivores and might benefit from a diet like this, very few dogs need the concentrated nutrients and calories of a grain-free diet.

**I read online that by-products can contain hair, hooves and floor sweepings, is this true?**

By-products are commonly vilified, often by diet manufacturers trying to carve out market share for themselves by offering diets that do not contain them. By-products (mainly organ meats and entrails) often provide more nutrients than muscle meats on a per weight basis and are important components and even delicacies of human diets in other countries. The term by-product comes from the fact that they are the leftovers from animal carcasses once the desirable (for Americans) muscle meat has been removed. AAFCO definitions of mammal by-products specifically exclude hair, hooves, horn, hide trimmings, manure and intestinal contents, as well as anything that is not specifically part of the carcass (floor sweepings for example). Like all ingredients, the quality of by-products can vary, so it is important to select manufacturers who have stringent internal quality control standards.

**What is the best diet for a growing puppy or kitten?**

Growing kittens should be fed a kitten diet or an all life stages formula until one year of age. Growing small and medium breed puppies should be fed a puppy or all life stages formula until one year of age. Large and giant breed puppies (adult size >50 lbs) should be fed a diet specifically designed for large breed puppies until 12-18 months of age. It is ideal if these products have passed AAFCO feeding trials rather than just being “formulated to meet” the nutrient profiles for growth. This information can be found on the product label.

Throughout growth, it's important to keep your puppy or kitten lean to reduce risks for health problems and to optimize his or her lifespan. Be aware that spaying or neutering your pet reduces his or her calorie requirements so it's important to reduce calories at the time of surgery to reduce the risks for obesity. We are happy to help you select appropriate diets for your breeding animals or growing puppies and kittens.

**Which vitamins/supplements should I add to my pet's diet?**

If your pet is eating a complete and balanced commercially available pet food, supplements are not recommended unless specifically prescribed by your veterinarian. This reduces the chances of excesses and adverse nutrient or medication interactions. Talk to your veterinarian if you are interested in using a particular supplement for your pet, and keep your veterinarian informed if you are giving your pet any supplement. This is important information for him or her in order to be able to optimally care for your pet.

### **Are there foods I SHOULDN'T feed my pet?**

There are many foods that should not be fed to pets because they are toxic or because they may cause other health problems. Examples include very high fat items such as chicken skin, grapes and raisins, bread dough, macadamia nuts, chocolate, garlic, onions, and foods artificially sweetened with xylitol. More information can be found here: <http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/poison-control/>.

### **How do I find recipes for home made diets/contact and consult with a veterinary nutritionist?**

If you would like to work directly with a veterinary nutritionist to develop a customized home cooked diet for your pet, produce and market a pet product, or consult on any other issue, please visit our Diplomate Directory at: <http://www.acvn.org/directory/>

If you are not willing or able to visit a nutritionist there is the option of visiting Balanceit.com. This website is run by a veterinary nutritionist, and you can use their recipe generator ( <https://secure.balanceit.com/tools/recipegenerator/> ), where you input the pet information and it will give you a semi-customized recipe. It will give you plenty of complete and balanced options for small breed puppies (not for large breed, I think). And free of charge, as long as you use their supplement (there is a fee if you want to use other supplements).