Clients can be passionate about choosing the best food for their pets. With thousands of pet food products on the market, how do pet owners make the best choice? Pet food labels are a good place to start. Understanding the label information can help pet owners make informed decisions about the food they feed their pets. Knowing how to read a pet food label can help veterinary professionals answer client questions, serve their pets’ nutritional needs, and optimize patient care. This article answers some frequently asked client questions regarding pet foods and their labels.

Which part of the label helps assess the quality of a pet food?
The following key components of a pet food label help evaluate nutritional information:

- A nutritional adequacy statement from the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO [www.aafco.org]; a nongovernment advisory organization with representative officials from every US state)
- A list of ingredients (in descending order by weight)
- A guaranteed analysis
- The AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement declares whether the product or treat is complete and balanced and whether it should be fed under veterinary supervision. The following types of nutritional adequacy statements can appear on a pet food label:
  - Animal feeding trials using AAFCO procedures substantiate that the product provides complete and balanced nutrition for all life stages or a particular stage.
  - The product is formulated to meet the nutrient levels established by AAFCO for a particular life stage or for all life stages.
  - The product is intended for intermittent or supplemental use only.

In a feeding trial, a product is fed to a specific number of dogs or cats for a minimum of 6 months to determine whether it provides adequate nutrition. By conducting feeding tests, pet food companies ensure that animals in a particular life stage (i.e., gestation, lactation, growth, adult maintenance) will obtain proper nutrition from a food. Feeding trials also provide some assurance of palatability and the availability of nutrients.

When a food is formulated by calculation or chemical analysis, the nutrients meet the maximum or minimum levels established by AAFCO. Because the finished product is not fed to animals, availability and palatability are not assessed.

The nutritional adequacy statement regarding intermittent or supplemental feeding applies to treats or to veterinary diets that require a veterinarian to monitor the patient.

What should I know about pet food ingredients?
The following are important to know about pet food ingredients:

- Each ingredient, including additives, must be listed in the ingredients statement.
- Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight.
- However, this does not reveal the amounts of the ingredients. For example, wheat germ meal, wheat bran, and wheat flour are all components of wheat, but they may provide different nutrients. The ingredient list is valuable when a patient has a confirmed allergy and must avoid a certain allergen.
- AAFCO defines what ingredients can or cannot be called. For example, according to AAFCO, corn gluten is the part of the commercial, shelled corn after removal of the larger portion of the corn’s starch and germ.

Key Points

- Understanding pet food labels is the first step in choosing the right food to help make an optimal nutritional plan for a patient.
- Animals require specific nutrients from the ingredients in their foods.
- The new regulation to include calorie information on pet food labels might help decrease the number of overweight pets.
What do the percentages mean on pet food labels?

AAFCO regulations require pet food manufacturers in the United States to include a guaranteed analysis that lists percentages of certain nutrients on pet food labels. These percentages (i.e., minimum protein and fat; maximum fiber and water) are listed on an as-fed basis. “As fed” simply means the percentage of each nutrient, including water or moisture, contained in the final product the pet consumes. To compare products on a level “playing field,” clients and veterinary professionals should always use the dry matter (without moisture) equivalent listed on pet food labels. If a dry matter basis is not used, canned food appears to have a lower concentration of nutrients than dry food because the latter contains approximately 10% water and canned food contains approximately 75% water.

What are the “chemicals” listed in pet food ingredients?

Pet owners may be concerned to see “phylloquinone,” “α-tocopherol,” “cobalamin,” and “ascorbic acid” listed on their pets’ food until they learn that these are the technical names for vitamins K₁, E, B₁₂, and C, respectively. α-Tocopherol is also an antioxidant. Antioxidants are added to foods to balance the nutrient profile and preserve fats; therefore, preservatives are not universally bad for pets and prevent foods from becoming rancid.

What are by-products in pet foods?

Many client questions about pet food result from misunderstandings about particular ingredients. Clients may incorrectly think that by-products are only the undesirable parts of animals, such as hooves, feathers, and beaks. However, by definition in the pet food industry, meat by-products are clean parts other than meat, such as lungs, kidneys, and spleens. By-products are an excellent source of amino acids, protein, vitamins, and minerals. For example, poultry by-products contain 70% protein on an as-fed basis and are highly digestible.

Who is responsible for ensuring the quality of pet foods?

Several governing agencies have a role in regulating pet food. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has authority over pet foods. The FDA establishes certain labeling regulations for animal food and enforces regulations about contamination. Feed control officials from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) work with the FDA to inspect facilities and enforce regulations within each US state. AAFCO defines ingredients and has an agreement to work with FDA scientists to ensure the safety of ingredients. Owners can voluntarily submit reports using the FDA Safety Reporting Portal: www.safetyreporting.hhs.gov.

Are “organic” or “natural” ingredients or foods better for pets?

As more pet foods are manufactured to meet the demand for organic and natural ingredients, pet owners and veterinary professionals need to understand these terms. AAFCO recently defined “natural” as originating from animals or plants. AAFCO has no regulatory definition for “organic,” which refers to the procedure by which organic ingredients are grown, harvested, and processed. There is no evidence that organic food is more beneficial to animals than nonorganic food. Pet foods that meet the human standard for organic (at least 95% of the content by weight, excluding salt and water, must be organic) may display the USDA organic seal on their packaging. The FDA uses “natural” to describe food and “organic” to describe food and the way in which it was processed.

What are the feeding guidelines on pet foods?

Complete and balanced pet foods must include feeding directions on their labels. However, one set of feeding guidelines cannot account for the great variation in metabolic rates and nutritional needs among individuals. In addition, breed, temperament, environment, and many other factors can influence food intake. Feeding guidelines provide a good starting point for clients but may overestimate the needs of some pets, leading to weight gain. Therefore, pet owners and veterinary professionals may have to adjust the feeding guidelines on a case-by-case basis to achieve a healthy, lean body condition in pets.

I just changed my dog’s food. Why is he/she gaining weight?

The size of a “cup” is commonly misunderstood. When my veterinary hospital obtains a patient’s diet history and the client says that he or she is feeding a “cup” of food, the staff asks the client to be as specific as possible: Can you show me how big the cup is? Do you know how many ounces it holds? Is the cup an 8-oz measuring cup? The amount of calories fed to a pet can vary greatly depending on the cup or the brand of food. When clients change their pet’s food, they are often unaware that there can be a large discrepancy in the amount of calories in different foods. The feeding guidelines on pet food labels refer to a standard 8-oz measuring cup.

Why aren’t calories listed on pet food labels?

Calorie content is not on most pet food labels, but I and many others think that it should be included. The format of pet food labels was derived from large animal feed packaging, which does not legally require the inclusion of calorie content. AAFCO recently voted to mandate the inclusion of calorie content on pet food labels.

Conclusion

Veterinary technicians can play an important role in patient nutrition. If read correctly, pet food labels can provide important information for optimizing patient care. Educating clients about the myths and misconceptions regarding pet foods and their labels is a good place to start. I am hopeful that the inclusion of calorie content on pet food labels will help veterinary professionals control the obesity problem in pets. Clients with questions about a pet food or its label should be encouraged to contact their veterinary hospital or the pet food manufacturer.

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References

1. Which part of a pet food label indicates whether a food is complete and balanced?
   a. the ingredient panel
   b. the nutritional adequacy statement
   c. the feeding guidelines
   d. none of the above

2. If the nutritional adequacy statement indicates that a pet food has been formulated to meet established nutrient levels, which of the following is true?
   a. The nutrients do not meet the maximum level established by AAFCO.
   b. The nutrients meet the maximum or minimum levels established by AAFCO.
   c. The nutrients do not meet the minimum level established by AAFCO.
   d. none of the above

3. Pet food ingredients are listed in
   a. ascending order by weight.
   b. no particular order.
   c. descending order by weight.
   d. none of the above

4. The guaranteed analysis on pet food labels lists the ________ levels of protein and fat.
   a. minimum
   b. maximum
   c. minimum and maximum
   d. none of the above

5. By-products in pet foods
   a. are strictly undesirable animal parts such as feathers, hooves, and beaks.
   b. have no nutritional value.
   c. are rendered parts of meat.
   d. none of the above

6. Who regulates pet food?
   a. only the FDA
   b. only AAFCO
   c. the FDA, the USDA, and AAFCO
   d. none of the above

7. What does “natural” mean on a pet food label?
   a. originating from plants or animals
   b. originating only from plants
   c. originating only from animals
   d. none of the above

8. Which of the following influence(s) food intake?
   a. breed
   b. temperament
   c. environment
   d. all of the above

9. Corn gluten does not contain the corn’s
   a. starch.
   b. gluten.
   c. starch and germ.
   d. none of the above

10. By-products are an excellent source of
    a. amino acids.
    b. protein.
    c. vitamins.
    d. all of the above