

## Understanding Pet Food Labels

- Understanding pet food labels is the first step in choosing the right food to help make an optimal nutritional plan for a pet.
- 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.
- The product is intended for intermittent or supplemental use only.

The presence of either of the first two statements indicates that a food can be used as the sole source of nutrition. “Complete and balanced” indicates that a food has all the recognized, required nutrients in the proper proportions, when fed appropriately.

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 trials, 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.

Pet owners can be passionate about choosing the best food for their pets, but 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.

### Which Part of the Label Helps Assess Quality?

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; 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.

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When a food is formulated by calculation or chemical analysis, the nutrients may meet the maximum or minimum levels established by AAFCO, but 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 pet.

### What Should I Know About the Ingredients?

The following are important to know about pet food ingredients:

- Each ingredient, including additives, must be listed in the ingredients statement.

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- 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.

### What Do the Percentages on the Label Mean?

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," pet owners 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" in the 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 K<sub>1</sub>, E, B<sub>12</sub>, 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 the By-products on the Label?

Many pet owner questions about pet food result from misunderstandings about particular ingredients. Pet

owners 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 Ensures 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

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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](http://www.safetyreporting.hhs.gov).

### Are Organic or Natural Ingredients Better?

As more pet foods are manufactured to meet the demand for "organic" and "natural" ingredients, pet owners need to understand these terms. AAFCO has 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

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“natural” to describe food and “organic” to describe food and the way in which it was processed.

### Are the Feeding Guidelines Right for My Pet?

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 (with guidance from a veterinary professional) may have to adjust the feeding guidelines on a case-by-case basis to achieve a healthy, lean body condition in pets.

### Why Is My Pet Gaining Weight on New Food?

The size of a “cup” is commonly misunderstood. The feeding guidelines on pet food labels refer to a standard 8-oz measuring cup, so if a pet owner is using a 12-ounce coffee mug or other larger “cup,” it is easy to accidentally overfeed a pet. Also, the amount of calories fed to a pet can vary greatly depending on the brand of food. When pet owners change their pet’s food, they are often unaware that

there can be a large discrepancy in the amount of calories in different foods.

### Why Aren’t Calories Listed on the Label?

Calorie content is not on most pet food labels, but that may be changing in the future. 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

If read correctly, pet food labels can provide important information for optimizing pet nutrition. Clients should educate themselves about the myths and misconceptions regarding pet foods and their labels. Clients with questions about a pet food or its label should contact their veterinary hospital or the pet food manufacturer.

### Learn More

For more information on pet food labels, visit the FDA’s Web site at <http://www.fda.gov/animalveterinary/resourcesforyou/ucm047113.htm>.