Making Calories Count

Calories. In addition to being something that most of us count for ourselves, calories are an important issue for our patients. Whether we are trying to achieve slow, steady growth in a puppy, selecting an appropriate diet for a working dog, designing a weight-loss program for an obese cat, or ensuring adequate food intake for an ill animal, optimizing our patients’ caloric intake is critical to their health.

Nearly all people read the labels on their own foods, with calories being the most popular nutritional fact on the label. While the degree of understanding of food labels varies, most people are comfortable with calorie information. Like human food labels, pet food labels include nutritional information, which can be helpful to veterinarians and pet owners alike. However, a key piece of information is missing from pet food labels: calories.

The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) promotes uniform pet food regulations through a model bill that states can use to set standards for feed laws, including labeling. In this bill, AAFCO specifies information that is required, information that is allowed, and information that is prohibited on pet food labels. Calorie information is allowed, but it is required only if a pet food is labeled as low calorie, light, or reduced calorie. Interestingly, it is also only required to be in the format of calories per kilogram of food, which is helpful in directly comparing products but is obviously not a particularly useful format for veterinarians or pet owners, who typically feed by cans or cups. Additional calorie content information in terms of familiar household measures (e.g., cans, cups, biscuits) is permitted but is not mandatory. Further complicating the issue is the dual function of pet food labels as a form of advertisement to pet owners as well as a source of nutritional information. Unfortunately, most owners base their purchasing decisions on the advertising aspect of the label (and other advertising) rather than on nutritional facts.

Some companies have product guides that list calorie information for diets that are available from veterinarians, but this information is not readily available to consumers, and these foods represent only a small proportion of the market. Some manufacturers provide calorie information on their Web sites. A few voluntarily include calorie information on the pet food label. However, in most cases, owners and veterinarians who want basic calorie information that allows them to compare products from multiple manufacturers, or even multiple products from one manufacturer, are left with the daunting task of telephoning or emailing each company individually.

To address the growing issue of pet obesity and increased interest in pet nutrition among both owners and veterinarians, the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN) made a proposal to AAFCO to amend its model bill. The proposal includes three key components:

- That calorie information be required on all pet food labels
- That the calorie information be expressed as calories per kilogram and per familiar household measure
- That the label state how the calorie information was determined (i.e., by chemical analysis and calculation or by animal feeding)

The purpose of these proposed amendments is, first and foremost, to provide pet owners and veterinarians with useful and needed label information on caloric content for all dog and cat foods. This will allow people to make sound, informed purchasing decisions and to use the product that is most appropriate for their pet. Such decisions...
will be especially helpful in managing the increasing problem of pet obesity, but they also will be of service to dogs and cats of all life stages, irrespective of any weight management concerns. Without complete information on all products, owners and veterinarians cannot adequately compare products to make informed decisions, nor can they feed a selected product to its best advantage in an individual animal. The proposed amendments would help ensure that this basic information is readily available to pet owners and veterinarians and would help keep pets healthier. The amendments would also be of benefit to the pet food industry. By requiring calorie content statements on all pet food labels, they would provide a level playing field for manufacturers and reduce consumer confusion.

First submitted to AAFCO 2 years ago, the ACVN proposal remains in committee discussion. Both AVMA’s executive board and the AAFCO advisor representing the American Animal Hospital Association have written letters of support for the proposal, but this has not provided enough convincing evidence. What is needed now is confirmation that veterinarians and, especially, pet owners would like to see calorie information on pet food labels. A letter or email to AAFCO (see www.aafco.org for contact information) would help demonstrate to AAFCO that calorie information is being demanded by both sectors. Sending a copy of this correspondence to pet food companies may also be helpful in moving the proposal forward. If passed, calorie content statements on labels would be highly beneficial information that owners and veterinarians could use in conjunction with a product’s overall nutritional profile to make sound decisions about our pets’ health.