

## Choosing Your Dog's Food

The topic of dog food is a heated one among dog owners. Some people believe that dog food is dog food and just buy the cheapest brand available. There are others that believe that the most expensive brand is better because it costs more.

The shelves of grocery stores, discount stores and pet stores are loaded with an array of enticing looking pet foods ...from the shiny, colorful bags with labels depicting playful, happy dogs, to the stacks upon stacks of canned foods ...and all of them claiming to be 100% complete, nutritious and delicious. Are those cute orange and green bits in that kibble really made from vegetables? Are those perfect little moist and marbled cubes really rich and meaty?

How do you choose? After all, you only want the best for your dog ...Right?

You can ask your veterinarian to recommend a food, but keep in mind that unless he or she is also a nutritional specialist there is almost no nutritional training in vet schools. The nutritional training they do get is often taught or subsidized by the big name pet food manufacturers. Can you guess what they might recommend?

Price shouldn't be the main concern when making your choice. You'll find that after feeding a better-quality food for a month or so, you'll begin to notice that your dog requires less of that food to maintain an appropriate weight, since the new food is more nutritious. As a result, the amount that you end up paying for the better food usually equals out to about what you were paying for not-so-good food before. So ...just paying more for a dog food does not necessarily make it better.

The lesser-quality dog foods are made from by-products of the human food industry. Huge human food processing corporations essentially invented the pet food industry as a way to make profits from their waste. These companies have hefty advertising budgets and their pet foods are well advertised, so their names become familiar to the general public. The general public is more likely to purchase something when they recognize the name; they trust what is said in the commercials buy these products. The companies that produce these dog foods can afford all this advertising because they use cheap, low-quality ingredients in their products.

The healthier, high quality foods are not advertised like the low quality brands are because they use more expensive, better-quality, (often human grade) whole ingredients in their foods. Advertising their products would make the cost go up in order compensate. The people that purchase their products do not need to be bombarded with heavy advertising because they already know how to choose a better product.

Where can you find the better foods? Until recently it was nearly impossible to find the high quality foods in the major "big box" type stores or grocery stores. But, just as consumers have become more aware of their own diets and are turning to healthier choices for themselves, they are also demanding the same for their pets. As a result you can find a few healthy alternatives at stores such a Pet Supermarket, Petco, and Pet smart; you just have to know how to sort them out.

Many concerned owners have begun to feed their pets only home-prepared meals. That's great, but with today's hectic lifestyles it's not always convenient. The best variety of healthy commercial pet foods will be found at locally owned "healthy alternative" pet stores. Most carry only the healthier foods as well as frozen raw diets and healthy treats and supplements. The added bonus is you are supporting a local merchant that can help you make informed choices when selecting the products that will best meet your pet's needs.

**The key to choosing the right dog food is simply knowing how to read the label.**

**Look for these acceptable ingredients:**

**Specifically named meat protein sources**, such as chicken, turkey, lamb, beef, etc. There is a debate over whether whole meat is better than meal. The difference is that whole meat can be up to 70% moisture, where meat meal has had all the moisture removed before being processed into kibble. This means that a pound of 'chicken meal,' for example, is made of more meat than a pound of 'chicken,' because up to 70% of the weight of the 'chicken' can be water weight.

'**Good carbs**', such as rice, oatmeal, millet, amaranth, and potatoes or sweet potatoes. The ones listed here are considered 'good carbs,' because they do not have unwanted 'side effects' like the 'bad carbs' detailed later in this article. However, carbohydrates are really not needed by the dog - dogs get their energy from meat protein & fat. The reason for inclusion of carbs/grains in kibble is simply because it's needed to hold the product together.

**Specifically named fat sources**, and preferably animal fats such as 'chicken fat.' Dogs are able to utilize animal fats better than vegetable oils, but sunflower, canola, and flaxseed oils (as long as your dog is not sensitive to them) are okay. Try to avoid foods that contain beef tallow, generic vegetable oil, poultry fat, and mineral oil.

Generally, you can get a good idea of what a food is primarily made up of by looking at all the ingredients listed before the first named fat or oil.

**Avoid these unacceptable ingredients:**

**By-products.** By-products are the leftovers after the processing plants remove what meat is fit for human consumption. By-products can contain anything from chicken heads and feet, to cow hooves and horns, fur, feathers, blood, skin, bone, feces, and even dirt and sawdust from the floors of the meat processing plant. By-products can also include innards, such as intestines and other organs that we do not eat. These can be very nutritious for our dogs if handled in the same manner that the human grade meats are, but by-products are not kept fresh, since they are considered unfit for human consumption, and in some cases have even been known to sit in containers for 5 days or more before being picked up from the meat plant and taken to the dog food rendering plant.

**Corn** in any form, including ground yellow corn, corn meal, and corn gluten meal. Corn is what is known as a 'filler' and it serves one primary purpose in pet food – to make the animal feel full. It also contains some protein; so many dog food manufacturers use it to help raise the protein content in their food. However, dogs and cats cannot digest corn and utilize the protein it contains, so it basically just passes right through the digestive system and you get the privilege of cleaning it up when it comes out the other end. It also can make dogs hyper, because it is a carbohydrate. Dogs do not get their usable energy from carbs like people do; they get it from protein and fat, as I mentioned earlier. Some dogs are also allergic/sensitive to corn, so if you simply avoid any foods that contain any form of corn in their ingredients listing and you'll be doing your dog and yourself a big favor.

'**Generic, unidentified ingredients** like "animal fat," "animal digest," and "meat meal" you have no idea what kind of meat these could contain (and you may not want to know). Instead, you want to look for things that are more specific, like "chicken fat" and "chicken meal," that way you know exactly what is in the food.

**Chemical preservatives** such as "ethoxyquin," "BHA," "BHT," and "**propylene glycol**" (which is also found in antifreeze, body lotions, hair gels, perfumes, bubble bath, shampoo, smoke machines, and paint). Chemical

preservatives make the food last longer than natural preservatives, but every single one of them has been proven to cause liver and kidney failure, cancer, or other life-threatening diseases in test animals. Pet food manufacturers will tell you that in small quantities, the preservatives are safe, and they probably are, but if you stop and think about it, your dog will be ingesting small quantities of these preservatives every day over his entire life span. They can then build up to toxic levels inside his body and that's when they become deadly. You want food that's been naturally preserved. "Mixed tocopherols" is a natural preservative and is acceptable.

**Brewer's Rice.** White rice or brown rice are both okay, but brewer's rice is not. Why? Brewer's rice refers to the tiny pieces of broken rice that remain after the milling process is complete. These particles are so tiny that they will pass through a sieve with a 1.4 millimeter round perforation. Look on a ruler to see how small that is. One 16th of an inch (the tiny marks between the inch marks) is very close - about 1.5 millimeters. Brewer's rice, like brewer's yeast, is a by-product of the beer making industry, and is used as another filler in dog food, and has very little nutrition, if any at all.

**Soy.** Soy is another filler, like corn. It's used as a protein source, but again, dogs are unable to utilize proteins from plant sources, and some dogs are allergic to it.

**Sorghum** is another filler, as well as a fiber source. Sorghum is an Old World grass that is cultivated as grain and forage. Sounds like the perfect thing for a dog to be eating, don't you think? To be fair, though, it is not an allergen, and shouldn't cause any reactions or health concerns, and it is an okay source of fiber.

**Wheat.** Wheat is really only an issue if your dog is allergic to it, but wheat also played a big part in the recent pet food recalls, so avoiding it altogether is a good idea. Often, manufacturers will use several wheat ingredients, splitting them up so that it appears that there is less of it in the food. Watch for this!

**Salt.** While found in many dog foods, is an unnecessary ingredient, so if the dog food you choose contains salt, make sure it's down near the bottom of the list of ingredients, as there is usually a form of sodium in the added vitamins. Too much salt in the dog's diet can cause the same problems that it does in humans.

**Mill run or grain fragments.** These ingredients are, in a nutshell (pun intended), the shells, hulls, and tiny grain fragments that are too small to be used for anything else and would otherwise be thrown out. They are a filler and a source of fiber in dog foods, and have zero nutritional value.

**Added colors or flavorings.** If a food contains sufficient, high quality meat, there really is no need to add extra flavorings to it. Coloring is added for our benefit, to make the little meat-shaped pieces look more like meat, and the veggie-shaped pieces look more like veggies. Dogs don't care, and many of these colorings can be harmful when ingested over an extended period of time. Just like chemical preservatives, in small quantities, they are relatively (not completely!) harmless, but when fed over the course of a lifetime, they can build up to toxic levels.

**Sugar and/or corn syrup.** Dogs love sweets just like kids (and many adults) do. Sugar or other sweeteners are absolutely unnecessary ingredients in pet foods, added to make the product more attractive. Continuous intake can promote hypoglycemia, obesity, nervousness, cataracts, tooth decay, arthritis and allergies. Pets also get addicted to foods that contain sugars, so it can be a tough piece of work to make them eat something healthier.

**Before you go shopping check out this helpful website**

Ratings of various foods by stars with 5 stars being the best: [dogfoodadvisor.com](http://dogfoodadvisor.com)