

Understanding Pet Food Labels

As pet owners, it is very important that we understand exactly what we are feeding our pet. Reading labels can be very confusing and sometimes foods are not even what they claim to be. The following information should help you in understanding pet food labels.

What does AAFCO do? (Association of American Feed Control Officials)

- sets the standards for pet foods and feeding trials
- establishes maximum and minimum for key nutrients
- defines ingredients and their terms

“Life-Stage” Nutrients

Nutrient needs change as pets grow. Therefore, it is important that owners feed their pet the proper diet during the animal’s particular life-stage. The following life stages have been recognized by *Hill’s and* most major food manufacturers:

1. Pediatrics (up to 12 months of age):

This stage is in need of more energy (calories) and protein.

2. Adults (1 – 7 years of age):

This stage requires a balanced amount of nutrients.

3. Seniors (7 years of age and up):

This stage requires reduced amounts of phosphorus, certain minerals, calories, and protein.

*It’s also important to know that an *excess* of any of these nutrients can be just as damaging as a deficiency.*

What if a label says “For All Life-Stages”?

AAFCO requires that if a label has designated a food as “*all life-stages*”, the food must support the nutrient requirements of the *neediest* group. This would mean that “*all life-stages*” is actually a puppy/kitten food. Since seniors require decreased amounts of protein, an “*all life-stages*” food may not be the best choice for their needs.

What should I be looking for on a pet food label?

1. Nutritional Adequacy Statement – was the food test fed or formulated?
 - a. **Test Fed:** a feeding trial was done for at least 6 months.

- b. **Formulation Method:** the food was mixed up according to required nutrient profile and was never test fed to a group of cats or dogs.
2. Designates a life-stage (described above).
3. That the food company has the ability to back up their claims with science and that their claims are not just marketing.
4. There a toll-free number to get information easily on the actual nutrient content.
5. There is a 100% satisfaction guarantee (you can return the food if opened).

Reading Ingredients and Nutrient Contents

Ingredients on a food label are listed in a descending order by weight **before** processing. Meat products weigh a lot more before they are processed (meat contains a lot of moisture that is cooked out during processing). Even though “beef” might be listed first (for example), after processing it would really be much closer to the end of the ingredient list. When reading labels, the following information is helpful when deciding how much meat the food actually contains based on the terminology used on the bag.

“**Beef**” – must be at least 70% of total product.

“**Beef Dinner, Entrée, or Platter**” – must be at least 10% of total product.

“**With Beef**” – must be at least 3% of total product.

“**Beef Flavor**” – no requirement, pet must recognize (?) it as beef flavor.

Nutrient Contents: AAFCO requires that the guaranteed analysis lists only the nutrient maximums and minimums on the bag. They also only require that the following nutrients be listed:

1. **Protein**
2. **Fat**
3. **Moisture**
4. **Fiber**

Manufacturers of the food should be able and willing to give the **actual** amounts of nutrients if you contact them.

Fixed Formulation: this means that ingredients don’t change based on the expense of the ingredients at that time. Food companies can legally change the formulation of the food if the change is going to be less than 6 months duration. This means that they can even change the meat ingredient from beef to chicken for less then 6 months without changing the label on the bag or informing the consumer in any way!

By-Products: By-products are simply something produced in the making of something else. Human food examples are hot dogs, *Spam*, gelatin, and bouillon. There are “good” and “bad” by-products. Many by-products add important nutritional

value and palatability to the food. For example, poultry by-product meal is more digestible and has a lower protein to ash ratio than any other protein source.

Digestibility: the percentage of ingredients that is absorbed and used by the body creates less stool volume. Corn is actually the most digestible grain and only 2.3% of dogs with allergies are allergic to corn. Corn also is beneficial in that it contains 2.5% essential fatty acids compared to only 0.2% in rice.

All Natural Food vs. Organic

“Naturally Preserved”: This means that artificial preservatives were not added by the food manufacturer. However, it does not mean that the ingredients that they purchased were preservative-free.

“All Natural”: The final finished product cannot contain any chemically synthesized ingredients. All ingredients from the entire line of supply are natural.

“Organic”: Same as what it means for the USDA human definition. These products will have the green organic seal on the label.

“Human Grade”, “Holistic”, and “Fit for Human Consumption”: None of these terms are defined or recognized by AAFCO.