



5 Myths About Pet Food

Learn what's true and what's not when it comes to the food in the bowl

BY REBECCA L. REMILLARD, DVM, DACVN

Confused about how to select a food for your dog or cat? As a pet owner, you're bombarded with ads and advice—and not all of the information is reliable or even true. Here are five common myths about pet food.

MYTH #1: THE LABEL TELLS YOU ABOUT QUALITY

Have you ever pored over a pet food bag and its ingredient list, comparing and contrasting the information? Unfortu-

nately, despite what it may say about quality or grade, the packaging can't tell you about the quality of the food inside. This is by regulatory design. The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) develops and implements standards for the manufacture, distribution, and sale of animal food. AAFCO doesn't allow references to the quality or grade of an ingredient, so if a food says it's of a high quality or grade, this should not be taken as fact.

MYTH #2: HIGH-CARB FOODS ARE BAD

Corn, in particular, is a carbohydrate that gets a lot of attention. You may have heard that corn is a bad source of protein. Well, this is true. But no pet food manufacturer is using it as the major source of protein. They're using it as a non-fat energy source. Properly cooked corn is more than 85 percent digestible by both dogs and cats. Yes, carnivores can and do digest the starch in grain.

In fact, corn or other carbohydrates *should* be in the first three ingredients. That’s because kibble should be composed of approximately 40 to 60 percent starch with a protein content of 18 to 25 percent for dogs and 26 to 32 percent for cats—those are minimums per AAFCO guidelines.

For healthy dogs and cats, too much protein doesn’t usually cause a problem, but feeding high levels of protein over a long period of time, or to pets with underlying kidney problems, can be dangerous. That’s because the liver and kidney must work harder to eliminate the excess protein consumed.


Cats do have a higher protein requirement than dogs, and for cats, carbohydrates are not essential when sufficient high-quality protein and fats are available. However, despite concern about the effects of carbohydrates in cat foods, it does not cause any disease such as diabetes or appear to be a significant factor in the health of cats. It does lower the calorie intake compared with feeding fat, which is probably a good thing in this time when 30 percent or more of pets are overweight.

MYTH #3: WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

If you know your pet is intolerant or allergic to a particular item, then the ingredient list is a good place to check. But be aware that not everything in the food is on the label. For example, products stating that they contained “no soy” have tested positive for soybean in laboratory analysis. This is because, per AAFCO regulations, manufacturers must list ingredients they have used to make the food, but the product could be exposed to other ingredients during

READING THE LABEL

LEAST IMPORTANT on the label is the ingredient list. Veterinary nutritionist Dr. Rebecca L. Remillard says any time spent trying to decipher this would be better spent exercising your pet.

<p>Ingredients: Deboned Chicken, Chicken Meal, Oatmeal, Whole Ground Brown Rice, Whole Ground Barley, Chicken Fat (preserved with mixed Tocopherols, a source of Vitamin E), Salmon Meal, Dried Egg, Natural Chicken Flavor, Sunflower Oil, Dried Yeast, Whole Potatoes, Peas, Carrots, Whole Sweet Potatoes, Soy Protein Concentrate, Tomato Pomace, Monosodium Phosphate, Choline Chloride, Fish Oil, DL-Methionine, Ferrous Sulfate, Vitamin E Supplement, Zinc Sulfate, Inositol, L-Carnitine, Yucca Schidigera Extract, Manganese Proteinates, Niacin Supplement, Manganese Oxide, Potassium Iodide, Copper Proteinates, Calcium Pantothenate, Biotin, Pyridoxine Hydrochloride (a source of Vitamin B6), Vitamin B12 Supplement, Sodium Selenite, Menadiol Sodium Bisulfite Complex, Beta Carotene, Folic Acid.</p>	<p>Guaranteed Analysis:</p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>Crude Protein (min.)</td><td style="text-align: right;">41.0%</td></tr> <tr><td>Crude Fat (min.)</td><td style="text-align: right;">11.0%</td></tr> <tr><td>Crude Fat (max.)</td><td style="text-align: right;">14.0%</td></tr> <tr><td>Crude Fiber (max.)</td><td style="text-align: right;">6.0%</td></tr> <tr><td>Moisture Content (max.)</td><td style="text-align: right;">10%</td></tr> </table> <p><small>Animal feeding tests using Association of American Feed Control Officials procedures substantiate that NOM NOM Cat Food provides complete and balanced nutrition for adult cats.</small></p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>	Crude Protein (min.)	41.0%	Crude Fat (min.)	11.0%	Crude Fat (max.)	14.0%	Crude Fiber (max.)	6.0%	Moisture Content (max.)	10%
Crude Protein (min.)	41.0%										
Crude Fat (min.)	11.0%										
Crude Fat (max.)	14.0%										
Crude Fiber (max.)	6.0%										
Moisture Content (max.)	10%										

MOST IMPORTANT on the label is the AAFCO statement. Look for these key words and phrases, says Dr. Remillard: “feeding tests” and “complete and balanced nutrition” in the same species and life stage as your pet, in this case “adult dogs.”

SECOND MOST IMPORTANT on the label is the “fat” and “fiber” content of the Guaranteed Analysis or calorie content, if available. Most pets in the U.S. are overfed, under-exercised, and overweight, so Dr. Remillard suggests looking for the lowest fat, highest fiber content and fewest calories.

transportation or when equipment isn’t thoroughly cleaned. To be certain a particular ingredient hasn’t contaminated a product, you must look to a company that will stand by such a claim.

In some cases, you might see a familiar ingredient, such as “apple,” but it might not be what you have in mind. You can’t tell from the ingredient list what part of the product was used. Was it the whole piece of fruit or just the seeds, stem, or skin left over from something else?

MYTH #4: BY-PRODUCTS AND FILLER ARE UNSAFE

The web is rife with misinformation about what by-products are and what they can contain. Hair, horns, teeth,

and hooves are expressly prohibited, as is sawdust. What can by-products contain? It could be the organ meats people refuse to consume but a dog or cat would gladly eat because they’re highly nutritious (and tasty). Or, it could be the residue left after milling corn or barley for flour, which provides an excellent source of fiber and some B vitamins. *By-products* are secondary products that are produced as the result of some process, and the bottom line is: They aren’t inherently bad or of poor quality.

As with any ingredient, you can’t assess the quality of by-products simply by reading the label. But think of it this way: Manufacturers have certain specifications for their final products and hold their ingredient suppliers up to

those standards. It's far better to reject a truckload of an ingredient than to recall tons of product later.

Filler is also often referred to as a bad thing. But what's commonly called "filler" is actually fiber, something that most dogs and some cats should have in their diet for overall improved intestinal health and weight management.

MYTH #5: HOMEMADE DIETS ARE BEST

Producing a high-quality, nutritionally complete and balanced diet for dogs and cats at home is possible, but it's more difficult, time-consuming, and at times inconvenient. Most commercial pet foods provide consistently balanced nutrition and are generally quite palatable. Plus, the overall cost of producing equivalent foods in your kitchen can be far greater.

FINDING THE RIGHT FOOD

Now that we've debunked some of the common myths of pet food, what should you look for to find the right food for your pet?

» **Look for the AAFCO claim** reading: "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that (name of product) provides complete and balanced nutrition for (specific life stage)." This statement indicates that the diet has been formulated to meet minimum and maximum nutrient guidelines, and has also been fed to dogs or cats to ensure product digestibility and safety. Also, it indicates that the food is appropriate for the specific life stage of the pet and that the pets maintained their health and body weight while fed the food for at least six months.

» **Consult your veterinarian** for specific diet recommendations or ingredient and nutrient content that is best-suited to your pet's age and health

status. There is no one best dog or cat food. It's truly a match between the individual characteristics of your pet, your lifestyle (including location and budget), and the products available to you. At the end of the day, your pet is the best judge of which food is right for it.

If you have questions or your pet isn't responding as expected to its current food, contact your veterinarian. Your pet may require a different type of food for its life stage or health status. Some pets develop specific food intolerances, which need to be identified and addressed. A referral to a veterinary nutritionist may be needed to ensure balanced nutrition.

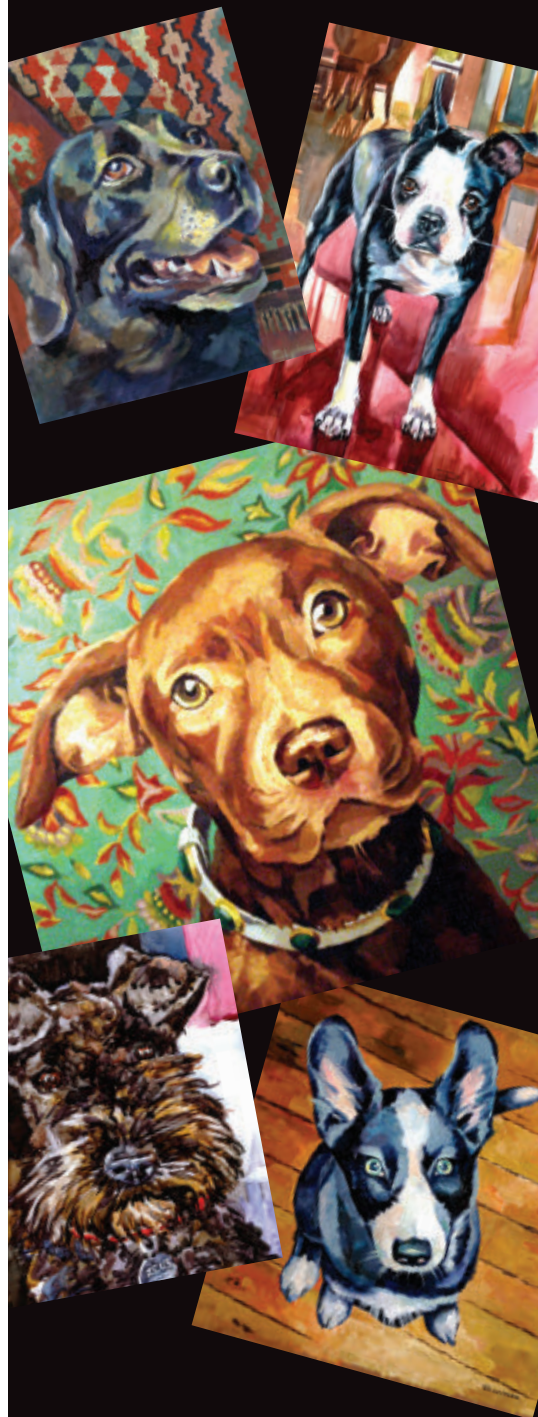
» **Reassess regularly.** After choosing a food that's AAFCO-approved and fits your pet's life stage, reassess the food after three to six months. Is your pet doing as well as you expected? If there's an issue, your veterinarian, not the pet store clerk, is your best resource.

» **Don't get overwhelmed.** A colleague once described pet food to me this way: Think of pet food like cars. There are all kinds of cars, but basically each one has four tires, an engine, a wheel, and gets you where you want to go. Sure, there are bells and whistles depending on how you want to get there. Nutritionally complete and balanced pet foods all have the same basic nutrient profile—within the minimum and maximum guidelines—and on average will sustain the majority of pets well into old age. Remember, if you have any questions, your vet is your best source. **HP**

Dr. Rebecca L. Remillard is the owner of Veterinary Nutritional Consultations Inc., in Hollister, N.C., which provides pet food advice. She is a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Nutrition and holds a Ph.D. in animal nutrition.

PET PORTRAITS

A Testament to Friendship



BY RENOWNED ARTIST
BORIS LYUBNER

BORIS@BORISART.COM

TEL: 435.649.2129

WWW.BORISART.COM/PETS