



Food 101

Food is the foundation of your dog or cat's health and well-being. A good diet can give your pet energy, long-life, healthy skin and a healthy glow.

What most people don't think about is that a low quality food can be EXPENSIVE. Food related issues are the most common cause of allergies, ear infections, fold infections, hairballs, dry skin, gas, and more.

The goal of this document is to help you understand how to read your dog or cat food's label.

To understand dog and cat nutrition, take a moment to think about their physiology. Dogs and cats are predators. Their eyes face forward to track prey. They have strong canines (for slicing and thrashing) that dominate their mouths. They have limited amylase in their saliva limiting their ability to break down complex carbohydrates. And they have short digestive tracts with a highly acidic environments meaning they can tolerate a high degree of bacteria, but can only eat things that they can process quickly. At the same time, dogs can go multiple days without eating.

With that in mind, we can think about how to read a pet food label to support this physiology. If you want, simply skip to the list of Good ingredients, OK to Feed, and Things to Avoid. The following overview information will provide context for those ingredients.

- **AAFCO:** This is the standard setting group for nutritional requirements for pet food. Like many government regulatory groups, AAFCO has members from large manufacturers, such as Science Diet, P&G, etc., in addition to nutritionists and veterinarians
- **FDA:** The FDA oversees 'bacteria' regulations in pet food. FDA regulations sometimes conflict with those of other regulatory bodies. For instance, the USDA (regulates human consumption of meat) does NOT have a zero tolerance for Salmonella (since it will be cooked out), but the FDA has a ZERO TOLERANCE for Salmonella (even though dogs and cats are not as susceptible, the FDA worries that people won't wash their hands).
- **Complete and balanced:** For a food to be labeled as a complete and balanced diet, it must meet a certain list of nutrient requirements.
- **Daily Feeding Recommendation:** This is not based on calories. Instead, it is based on the minimum amount required to meet the daily recommended allowance of the last nutritional ingredient. These recommendations assume that your pet must receive the exact same nutritional profile EVERY DAY (neither realistic nor necessary if you think about how most creatures eat with variety). Consequently, these guidelines can lead to overfeeding.
- **You will feed less of a high-quality food.** Think corn flakes with Granola, and the amount you need of each.



Good ingredients

- **MEAT!:** The first ingredient should be an identifiable meat, for instance, Chicken or Lamb, or identifiable meat meal, for instance Chicken Meal, Duck Meal
 - The term meal just means rendered – effectively dehydrated and ground. The term in front determines the ingredient. Meal has higher protein by weight, but some vets believe it has a lower protein bio-availability
 - On rare occasions, you may have a good food have a meal, for example Chicken Meal, as the second ingredient rather than the first. This occurs if you have a limited ingredient diet (single protein single carb) with a high mass carb, such as Potato.
- Whole fruits and vegetables, including carrots, peas, blueberries
 - If Beets, preferable to have sugar removed
 - Not Corn
- Sweet Potato and Potato: few goods without a concern...these have more starch
- Probiotics: Acidopholous, Lactobacillus, etc

OK ingredients

- Rice, oatmeal, barley or quinoa: these are lower gluten grains (see gluten explanation below)
- Chicken Fat: Often used as a vehicle for spraying on a multi-vitamin

Things to Avoid

- **By-Product or Digest (or by product meal/digest meal):** By products can include organs, but also can include beaks, feathers, claws, hooves, etc. Digest can include diseased, dying, decaying, and dead animals, as well as just about anything else on the line.
- Unidentified proteins, for instance POULTRY, MEAT, etc.
- Glutinous Grains, specifically Wheat, Corn and Soy
 - Glutens require additional enzymes to break down. Dog and cat saliva have limited amylase
 - Glutens are the number one allergen for most household pets.
- Animal Fat – Often includes the restaurant pour off bins, and of course, you can't identify which animal the fat came from.

Other Notes

- **Grain Splitting and Protein Pooling:** By breaking an ingredient up multiple times, for instance, corn, corn meal, corn kernel, you can lower its place on the label. Conversely, by calling it "Poultry" rather than separately listing Chicken, Duck and Turkey, you raise its place on the label.
- **Trust the source:** AAFCO labels each of the following as carrots: the whole carrot including the orange base and the herb top, the orange base, and just the herb top. You have to trust the source.