

What Pet Food Should I feed?



We recommend sticking with the four main popular pet foods manufacturers- Hill's Pet Nutrition, Royal Canin, Nestle Purina, and Iams PetCare. These companies control all aspects of development, manufacturing, and sales with more oversight of the pet food process and better quality control. These companies maintain therapeutic (prescription) pet food lines made with the same quality control as vaccinations and antibiotics, so products from their over-the-counter pet lines have better quality control as well. They also invest in veterinary research and their diets reflect the latest scientific knowledge of veterinary nutrition; their focus is on improving animal health and treating disease through diets.

In addition, any diet chosen, especially for puppies and kittens, should have a statement on the bag stating that the diet has undergone AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) feeding trials (not just formulated according to AAFCO requirements) and is meant for complete and balanced nutrition for a specific life stage (vs. "intermittent and supplemental feeding" which should be fed only as treat items). This means that the diet has actually been fed to a group of animals and they thrived, instead of someone simply calculating a "good diet" in a computer program.

If a pet food manufacturer makes any claims that seem "too good to be true," they probably are. Websites are unregulated and often make outrageous unscientific claims. Any manufacturer that utilizes marketing materials bashing competitors should be avoided. For instance, some companies make negative statements about competing diets that contain "chicken by-products". These companies rely on this marketing strategy to instill doubt about a particular ingredient in the consumer's mind in order to sell their own food. "Chicken by-products" are not "bad ingredients" as marketing campaigns imply- they are simply organ meats that are highly nutritious. These companies often substitute bovine spleen or lung.

A pet food manufacturer should include a full-time nutritionist on staff- either a PhD or a board-certified veterinary nutritionist DVM. If you aren't sure, call the company and ask!

Grain Free Diets

Grains are the seeds of plants including wheat, corn, oats, rice, millet, and rye. Negative media portrayal of grains as pet food ingredients may have originated as a way for smaller pet food companies to set themselves apart from larger, established companies in order to sell their products. There is no science to back up claims that pets, in general, do better when fed grain-free diets. In fact, a recent survey of pet food companies revealed that the current "grain-free" pet food trend is "consumer driven" vs. science driven.

Grain-free is not the same as carbohydrate-free. Most grain-free diets use simple carbohydrates such as potatoes, peas, or tapioca as carbohydrate sources which may not have enough fiber (vs. complex carbohydrates: grains such as oats, barley, and brown rice). The result can be a dog with poor stool quality and excessive intestinal gas production. In addition, these alternate carbohydrate sources have the potential to cause food allergies. An increase in feeding of these ingredients to our pets could certainly cause more pets to develop allergies to them and also limit options for therapeutic allergy diets for true allergy patients (a diet for a therapeutic hypoallergenic diet trial must only contain "novel" ingredients that a patient has never eaten in the past).

Grain-free diets vary greatly in protein, fat, and carbohydrate contents and they often are higher in fat and calories- a huge concern since the vast majority of our pets are already overweight.

The impact of a grain-free diet on food allergies is difficult to assess. Food allergy is responsible for only 10% of skin allergies in dogs and cats. Fleas and environmental/inhaled allergens are much more commonly the real problem. A review of the scientific literature revealed that when food allergy is present, the two most common allergens, by far, in dogs and cats were beef and dairy. Corn ranked much lower on the list of allergens for both species. In fact, corn, wheat, and soy are usually innocent of causing food allergies, despite what pet food marketing and propaganda may lead you to believe. True gluten (wheat) enteropathy, an allergic reaction to wheat gluten, is an extremely rare condition reported in young Irish Setters. Celiac disease and gluten sensitivity such as are diagnosed in humans are not issues in veterinary medicine. **The main take away message about grain-free diets is that as long as your pet doesn't have a true food allergy documented by your veterinarian to a specific grain there is no reason to feed a grain-free diet.**

Raw Diets

Some people advocate feeding dogs and cats raw food diets as if they were still wild, undomesticated animals. **We do not recommend feeding raw diets for several reasons.** Domestic dogs and cats are quite different from their wild ancestors. For example, dogs actually have specialized genes for starch metabolism that wolves do not. In other words, a Yorkie is not a very tiny wolf! Raw diets are only backed by testimonials and have not been proven to be safe and healthy in controlled scientific studies. Raw diets are often nutritionally inadequate with inappropriate amounts of calcium and phosphorus. Bones are sharp objects that may become lodged in a pet's stomach or bowel, causing fatal complications. Infectious agents, including Salmonella and E. coli, are not killed by freezing or dehydration and can be shed in a pet's saliva or feces after eating a raw diet, infecting humans with dangerous bacteria. Pets themselves can become ill from these bacteria or can show no signs of illness but still infect people in contact with them. For this reason specifically, **the FDA (Food & Drug Administration) does not believe raw meat foods are consistent with the goal of protecting the public from significant health risks and also warns against feeding them to pets.**