



Pet Food Label Checklist



This is a simple checklist to help you start asking the right questions when you shop for foods for your “healthy pet” (i.e. no known underlying conditions or predispositions towards disease that would be best treated by a prescription food)

These statements and their rank of importance are supported by board certified veterinary nutritionists

() **1. AAFCO FEEDING TRIAL STATEMENT** - The *American Association of Feed Control Officials* is the best assurance we currently have of quality control. Somewhere on the bag it should say “**meets or exceeds AAFCO standards by performance of a feeding trial**” (“meets or exceeds AAFCO established nutrient profiles” is better than no statement, but not as good as a feeding trial statement) An AAFCO feeding trial is expensive and takes 6 months but it is the current gold standard. The larger companies feed the food for 1 to 2 years in colonies of dogs to make sure long term deficiencies (like cardiomyopathy) don’t show up.

() **2. MANUFACTURER RESEARCH/BACKGROUND**– The bag should have contact info so you can call and get your questions answered, such as:

- Do you employ a full time board certified veterinary nutritionist (DACVN or ECVCN) or PhD in animal nutrition?
- Who formulates your diets?
- Are all of your foods manufactured at your own manufacturing plant?
- What specific quality control measures do you do to assure the consistency, quality & safety of your ingredients & end product?
- Can you provide a complete nutrition analysis?
- What product research has been done and are they published in a peer reviewed journal?

Note: *If the answer to any of these is no/declined we strongly suggest finding another company! See Pet Nutrition Alliance “Dare to Ask” tool at <https://petnutritionalliance.org/chart/>*

() **3. APPROPRIATE LIFESTAGE** - Growth (puppy), which includes lactation and maintenance are the only AAFCO recognized categories, Senior is NOT a recognized or established category and in fact those foods are often too high in fat/calories for a dog that is becoming more sedentary. (Be sure to discuss wellness testing with your veterinarian to find the optimal food for your senior pet).

() **4. APPROPRIATE CALORIC DENSITY** Pet foods can contain anywhere from 250 to over 500 Calories/cup which can lead to inadvertently feeding too many calories. With over 50% of pets being overweight this is a huge issue. Additionally the feeding charts typically overfeed.

() **5. INGREDIENTS LIST – IS LAST on our list because it is way less important and often overemphasized when a food is chosen. The reputation and quality control of the pet food company is much more important** <https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2019/03/stop-reading-your-pet-food-ingredient-list/>

Ingredients are listed in order of their % based on weight. Water rich ingredients will rank higher than dry ingredients and grouping or splitting (multiple forms of same basic ingredient) will sometimes distort which ingredient is truly present in the greatest amount.

() **Protein source** - Generally speaking, it is ideal to have a meat protein source in the top 3 listed ingredients. Dogs are omnivores not carnivores, so nutritionally they are closer to foxes and raccoons than wolves, evolutionarily. The canine diet does not have to be as high in protein as is sometimes advocated by

breeders, pet stores, internet sources, etc. Cats are true carnivores and there is emerging evidence to feed them as high a protein content as possible, especially to control weight.

() **Grains** - Corn, soy and wheat are actually good protein sources as well as a carbohydrate (energy) source, and are NOT considered “fillers” by AAFCO standards. They are usually more consistent in quality than meat protein sources. Gluten intolerance is very rare in dogs, so avoiding it is not generally necessary. **Corn is often cited as being allergenic but beef is actually a much more allergenic agent according to a recent veterinary dermatology study.** Some dermatologists feel corn could contain storage mite allergens which could precipitate a higher number of allergic reactions. Food allergies in general are uncommon, affecting less than 5% of all pets.

() **By products** are defined as products that are not used for human consumption, but are still classified as wholesome for pet foods. They include, liver, heart, kidneys and other primarily protein sources. The use of by-products can be justified on both a scientific and a sustainability viewpoint but on an emotional basis there is considerable variance in tolerance. They DO NOT include hair, hooves, beaks, etc. There is also considerable “spin” on the internet as to what these products are and are not what is generally stated on the internet. “Feed Your Pet Right” by Marion Nestle & Malden Nesheim provides an overall opinion by a non scientist and an emeritus professor from Cornell who have done considerable research and found no issues.

() **Carbohydrates** - Dogs have as omnivores certainly can digest and use them as an energy source. Cats are true carnivores and need no carbohydrates. Judicious use of carbohydrates is not a concern for board certified nutritionists.

() **Antioxidants** like Vitamin E, (often called tocopherols), are necessary to preserve dog food, especially fats. Natural antioxidants such as rosemary are fine but do shorten the shelf life.

() **Fish oils (EPA & DHA)** are sometimes lumped into “Omega 3 category” and need to be added in sufficient amounts. Sources like flax seed are not well converted by dogs & cats adequately to EPA to achieve therapeutic effects. The ratio of Omega 6 to 3 is NOT important (recent research), but a sufficient intake is VERY important (see westtownvet.com or consumerlabs.com for more info)

() **Glucosamine & Chondroitin sulfate** cannot be legally put into foods at a therapeutic level so they must be supplemented to achieve therapeutic levels. (Effectiveness & dose are both issues see consumerlabs.com or westtownvet.com for more info)

() **Prebiotics & Probiotics** If probiotics like Lactobacillus, Bifidobacterium etc. appear in ingredients list they CANNOT be considered active ingredients as the heat required to safely process foods (both canned & dry) kills them. Supplementation of these beneficial ingredients must occur. Prebiotics, like fructo-oligosaccharides provide food for probiotics and are heat tolerant and are fine.

() **Other** - You will see many ingredients that you may not recognize, most of which are antioxidants (natural or synthetic), stabilizers, mineral supplements and flavorings. Major ingredients are listed before salt and minor ones afterwards.

Please do as much research as you can and include us in what you find. In these times where jerky chicken treats have caused many unexplained kidney failures and currently BEG foods (Boutique, Exotic ingredient Grain free) have now been implicated in canine cardiomyopathy, It is VERY important for us all to ask questions and keep an open mind in order to keep our pets safe. Dr Ken

Resources

Pet Nutrition Alliance <https://www.petnutritionalliance.org/>

Pet Foodology Tufts Veterinary School Website <https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/tag/petfoodology/>

World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) <https://www.wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit>

WeethNutrition blog <https://weethnutrition.wordpress.com>