

reputable dog food brands, what a pet food label means, the controversies surrounding raw-food diets and grain-free diets, how to report complaints with your pet's food, and the fine print to watch out for.

Looking for something else?

Read more from [Pets](#)

Dog food buying highlights

- Discuss your dog's food with your vet—all dogs have their own activity levels, preferences, temperaments, and metabolisms.
- Look for a statement from the AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials), a [private organization that provides](#) nutrition standards, label regulations, and more guidelines for state, federal, and international pet food regulators.
- Feed your dog what's appropriate for their life stage, whether that's "puppy" or "senior," to ensure that they're receiving proper nutrition.
- Terms like "organic" and "gourmet" are marketing jargon, since there's no federal regulation for these words on pet food labels.
- Grain-free pet food hasn't been found to be better than traditional pet food. Unless your vet recommends a grain-free diet, you can skip paying extra.
- There's no evidence that raw-food diets are superior, and major veterinary groups oppose them because of bacterial concerns. If you do opt for raw dog food, commercially prepared food is safer than food made at home.
- A dog's food should account for 90% of their diet, and treats can round out the remaining 10%.
- The brand's serving-size guidelines are a good starting point. But if your pet is under- or overweight, consult your veterinarian to ensure that your dog is getting the right amount of calories (called "kilocalories" in pet food).

I'm Wirecutter's pets writer, and I've covered complex topics that require months of research, including for our guides to [dog DNA tests](#), [pet insurance](#), and [pet subscription boxes](#). For years, I ran an independent pet food blog, so I have a bit of knowledge on this complicated subject. For this guide, I researched pet food manufacturers and read up on the regulatory power of the [AAFCO \(Association of American Feed Control Officials\)](#) and the [U.S. Food & Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#). I sniffed out the positions on dog food types held by the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#), the [Pet Food Institute](#), and the [World Small Animal Veterinary Association](#). I also considered independent reviews and research by the American Kennel Club, PetMD, Veterinary Partner, Whole Dog Journal, and the well-known [Petfoodology](#) blog of the [Cummings Veterinary Medical Center](#) at Tufts University⁴, among others. I interviewed [Dr. José Arce](#), president of the American Veterinary Medical Association; Dr. Danielle Bernal of [Wellness Pet Company](#); [Dr. Karen Fine](#), a holistic veterinarian at [Central Animal Hospital](#) in Leominster, Massachusetts; Parisa Fowles-Pazdro, founder of pet-supply store [Maxbone](#); Dr. Darcia Kostiuik of [Champion Petfoods](#); Rachel Beck, director of Veterinary Technician Programs at [Banfield Pet Hospital](#); [Dr. Jerry Klein](#), chief veterinary officer of the [American Kennel Club](#); and Chris and Holly Reed, owners of Bayou, the [Giant Schnauzer who won](#) the 2021 AKC National Championship. Finally, I asked the manufacturers of 16 pet food brands, from big kibble to fresh startups, to spill the secrets on how they formulate their food, their quality-control processes, and their nutritional research.

My dog may happily devour the contents of a takeout container dropped on the street, but I know that won't provide proper nutrition. Dogs need [more than 30 nutrients](#) to thrive, and the nutrition of commercially prepared dog food is established by the [AAFCO](#). Don't buy dog food unless you see the AAFCO's [nutritional adequacy statement](#) attesting that the food is nutritionally sound. Though the AAFCO isn't a regulatory body, many states have adopted its standards, which are set with feed regulators, agriculture departments, and the FDA. The FDA regulates ingredients and how pet food

labels should appear.

The AAFCO divides pet food by species, life stage, and type of food. It's important to feed your dog the right food for their species and life stage to provide them with the proper nutritional requirements. For example, feeding senior dogs a calorie-rich dog food designed for active puppies may cause them to gain weight. And you shouldn't feed cats dog food—they require different nutrients.

Finding the right food for your dog is about more than just nutrition; we want our dogs to enjoy meal times! As long as their food is nutritionally adequate, feel free to cater to their preferences. Observe your dog at meal times: "Are they engaged? Are they happy?" asked Danielle Bernal, a veterinarian with [Wellness Pet Company](#). "When you think about what you're going to feed them it needs to factor in their total well-being."

Below we list some common types of dog food:

Dry food or kibble is the most popular form of dog food—it's easy to find, it can be stored at room temperature, it's cheap, and it's often sold in large quantities.

Canned or wet food is sold in single cans or pouches, or by the case, and it's typically more expensive than kibble. It has about 70% to 78% moisture, which may help keep pets hydrated for longer.

Semi-moist food typically comes in ready-to-serve pouches and is usually more expensive than kibble. It often contains more artificial colors, sodium, and sugar, too. The texture is often crumbly or like craft dough, and it has a shorter shelf life and can dry out quickly.

Some pet owners may consider **raw food** because they think of it as less processed than other forms of dog food. It's sold fresh, freeze-dried, or

dehydrated.

Vegan and vegetarian prepared foods are specialized diets that are often [popular among pet owners who are vegan themselves](#). Always consult a board-certified veterinary nutritionist or veterinarian with an understanding of nutritional health to see if your dog is a good candidate for a vegan or vegetarian diet.

Trendy, **grain-free** prepared foods contain potatoes or legume flour (beans, lentils, or peas) as a carbohydrate source, rather than the corn, oats, rice or wheat found in most pet food. Pet owners might opt for these because they've heard dogs can't process complex carbohydrates like grains or starchy vegetables. But dogs can digest them just fine, thanks to enzymes they produce that break them down, and cooked complex carbs like grains are also easier to digest than raw carbs, according to Dr. Ryan Llera and Dr. Cheryl Yuill of [VCA Animal Hospitals](#). Pet owners might also want to put their dogs on grain-free diets if they suspect a food allergy. But only 0.2% of dogs and 0.1% of cats have food allergies, noted a 2018 report from [Banfield Pet Hospital](#), and dogs tend to be allergic to specific ingredients, like chicken. Grains aren't common allergens for pets.

A pet owner may also buy **treats, supplements, toppers, and mix-ins** to supplement their dog's food. Although these extras may have some nutritional information on the label or come in a [traditional pet food can](#), they're not intended to be a pup's main food source. Our experts said a dog's main source of food should make up 90% of their diet, and treats can account for the rest.

What is the best dog food brand?

None of the independent experts we spoke with were direct on which of the [more than 500 pet food facilities \(PDF\)](#) in the United States (as reported by the [Pet Food Institute](#)) make the best dog food. And, as anticipated, representatives for dog food companies tended to recommend their

products over all others. The truth is that “there is no true gold standard for pet food,” admitted Dr. Darcia Kostiuik, senior veterinarian with [Champion Petfoods](#), the company behind [Acana](#) and [Orijen](#).

What’s good for a [professional dock-diving dog \(video\)](#) might not be what the pooch on the sofa beside you needs. Like people, dogs are individuals with different activity levels, preferences, temperaments, and metabolisms. As long as you consult your vet and select a product your dog enjoys eating, you’re well on your way to providing your pup with a great meal.

How to tell if a brand is reputable

There are, however, vet-approved [guidelines](#), created by the [World Small Animal Veterinary Association](#) (WSAVA), to help consumers gauge whether dog food manufacturers are credible. Though the AAFCO sets standards (adopted on a state-by-state level) for what goes into dog food in the US, it’s the WSAVA that sets international guidelines for key areas in veterinary care and pet nutrition.

If you want to make sure a brand of food for your pup is up to snuff—or whether that chic-looking new brand spamming your Instagram feed is worth it—a good place to start is to ask the company’s customer service about the [WSAVA’s guidelines \(PDF\)](#).

Any reputable pet food company should be able to provide insight about several things: whether or not it employs a vet nutritionist⁴; who formulates its diets (like a pet food formulator with an advanced degree in pet nutrition); its quality-control process; and whether it conducts any peer-reviewed product or nutritional research.

To get a sense of how easy it is for consumers to track down this important information, we posed as new pet owners and asked 16 different pet food companies, from big kibble firms to fresh startups, [WSAVA’s questions \(PDF\)](#). We received a mix of straightforward answers and responses that

skirted our questions. None of the companies were completely transparent, but generally speaking, [Fromm Family Pet Food](#), [Nom Nom](#), and [Royal Canin](#) offered direct answers to our questions, and they usually identified the people and processes involved in making their pet food. Some of the biggest players in pet food, including [Eukanuba](#), [Iams](#), and [Purina](#), never responded to our emails. Albeit annoying, it is possible to track down the answers to many of the WSAVA's questions by combing through the companies' sites.

How to read a dog food label

Standing in the dog food aisle comparing everything from caloric content to serving sizes is enough to make your head spin. Don't panic! Know that at the bare minimum, the [FDA has labeling standards](#), which include giving the name and address of the producer and listing ingredients in descending order by weight—just like labeling on packaged foods for humans. Most states have also adopted the AAFCO's more specific model of labeling language. Here's what you need to know about decoding the lingo on the label, based on our expert advice and FDA and AAFCO rules.

The most important section on the label is the “nutritional adequacy statement.” Don't buy a product if this statement is missing.

Often titled the “AAFCO statement” on the back of the label, this section confirms that the food contains the complete and balanced nutrition appropriate for your dog's life stage. If a product is missing this section, do not feed it to your dog as the main source of their diet.

If a product doesn't have this section, it might say somewhere on the label that the dog food is only “intended for supplemental feeding.” That might mean that the food should be used only as a treat or an add-on to your dog's main source of food.

Another case in which a food might not have the AAFCO statement is if it's

by prescription only. For example, a vet may recommend a vegetarian diet to help your dog manage a medical condition, and prescribe a specialty food that might not be considered “complete and balanced” by the AAFCO. But any product you buy over the counter as a dog’s main source of food should always have this section.

Most of the descriptive verbiage on the package is marketing jargon.

“Just because a food is labeled with a fancier name does not necessarily mean it contains ingredients that are any different or of higher quality,” noted Rachel Beck, a certified vet tech and director of Veterinary Technician Programs at [Banfield Pet Hospital](#). (Banfield is owned by [Mars Petcare](#), the makers of pet food brands like [Cesar](#), [Eukanuba](#), [Iams](#), [Pedigree](#), and [Royal Canin](#), among others.⁴)

Products labeled “premium” or “gourmet” aren’t required to have higher-quality ingredients and aren’t held to separate standards.

“Organic” food labeling requirements for pets don’t exist. But the [AAFCO has a definition for “natural,”](#) which can mean a [lack of artificial flavors](#) and preservatives or colors in the food, ingredients pet owners might choose to avoid if they prefer less-processed food. Color additives exist and are usually added so the food looks more appealing to humans.

For an ingredient to make it into the product name, the food needs to contain a certain percentage of the ingredient—but there are caveats.

AAFCO rules dictate how pet food ingredients can be listed in the product name. If there are multiple ingredients in the title, they must be listed in order of predominance, just like in the ingredients list. And though certain

percentages of the titled ingredients are required to even make it into the name, these vary greatly—from 3% to 95%. It's good to know the naming rules (and always check the ingredients list!) so you don't get duped into thinking something called "Dog Food with Chicken" is jam-packed with poultry.

Below we list some of the most important rules—and what they mean for your dog.

The 95% rule: If a dog food is simply named "[Ingredients] Dog Food," it [must contain at least 95%](#) of the named ingredients. Because of the high percentage of the named ingredients, products named like this tend to have "very few ingredients," according to the FDA site. Dog owners might appreciate that simplicity. The named ingredient or ingredients make up at least 95% of that named ingredient, excluding extra water added for processing. (Counting the added water, the ingredient will make up 70% of the total.) If a product is called "Beef 'n Liver Dog Food," the first two ingredients must be beef and liver, respectively, not liver and beef, and make up 95% of the product.

The 25% rule (or "dinner rule"): If a dog food has the term "dinner" in the title, the food can contain as little as 25% of the titular ingredient.

In fact, any product name with the term "dinner," "entree," "formula," "nuggets," or "platter" follows this rule. If there are multiple ingredients listed in a product name that contains those terms, the titular ingredients need to make up only 25% when combined. And any of those named ingredients can account for as little as 3% individually! So something called "Beef 'n Liver Formula Dog Food" might contain only 3% liver and 22% beef.

Because they need to account for just 25% of the total, the ingredients listed in the product name are often not the ingredients that make up the bulk of the food. For example, you'd think that the top three ingredients in [Eukanuba Chicken, Rice & Vegetables Dinner Adult Wet Dog Food](#) would

be chicken, rice, and vegetables. But the first ingredients listed are water, chicken, pork liver, and chicken liver.

This “dinner rule” leaves plenty of room for other ingredients to hide. Therefore it’s a good idea to read the ingredients list carefully so you’re not unknowingly buying something with ingredients your dog doesn’t like or is allergic to.

The 3% rule (or “with rule”): If a dog food title contains the word “with,” the food needs to contain only 3% of that named ingredient. So, “Dog Food with Chicken” likely contains very little chicken. For example, despite having large cuts of cooked chicken on the packaging, [Purina Dog Chow Complete Adult Dry Dog Food With Real Chicken](#) contains a lot less chicken than shoppers are led to believe: Poultry by-product and chicken are listed as the sixth and seventh ingredients, respectively.

Don’t worry too much about the “guaranteed analysis” section.

The “guaranteed analysis” is required to provide the percentage of protein, fat, fiber, and moisture content, but it shows only the minimum and maximum amounts that are guaranteed, notes [Petfoodology veterinarian Lisa M. Freeman](#). Therefore, “it’s fairly useless as a way to compare pet foods or judge the nutrient levels of an individual food,” she writes.

So if your vet tells you your dog needs to up their moisture intake, for example, and you’re comparing a few different products, call the manufacturers to confirm the amounts, rather than just referencing the guaranteed analysis. Ask them for the “average” or “typical” nutrient percentages, or the figures per 100 or 1,000 kilocalories, so it’s easier to compare. Remember that a good pet food company should employ nutritional experts and have quality-control measures to ensure consistency across products.

Don't be alarmed by unappetizing ingredients listed on your dog food. By-products and meals found in dog food may not sound appetizing to us, but they're safe for our pets to eat.

Here's what to know about some of the ingredients you might see:

Meat by-products and meal

"Meat by-product" can include mammal organs, bone, and fatty tissue.

"Meat meal" is any mammal tissue, with [some exclusions](#). This is cooked and pulverized into a meal or powder-like substance for pet food. No matter how yucky that sounds to you, "meat meal" may even contain more minerals than human-grade or aesthetically pleasing cuts of meat, notes the FDA. "Meat and bone meal are concentrated essential amino acids, calcium, and phosphorus, which help your dog maintain lean muscles, as well as strong teeth and bones," added Beck of [Banfield Pet Hospital](#).

Animal fat and vegetable fat

These add flavor, energy, and [nutrients](#), like omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, to pet food.

Plant ingredients

Items like barley, corn, rice, and wheat add energy, carbohydrates, and fiber to pet food. [Gums from seeds and plants](#) help the food retain its shape or texture.

Additives, preservatives, thickeners, and emulsifiers

These chemical-sounding names must meet the FDA's "[generally recognized as safe](#)" rule or be approved as food additives for their intended uses.

How much should I feed my dog?

Your pet's main food source should make up 90% of their diet. Treats can account for the other 10%. The amount of food your dog needs to maintain a

healthy weight varies by both pet and packaging. First, read the label carefully, since even the same line of food within a brand can have different serving requirements.

Next, always measure your dog's food, because eyeballing it contributes to pet obesity, noted Dr. Jerry Klein, [American Kennel Club](#)'s chief veterinary officer. Your vet can offer more personalized advice based on your dog's activity level, age, breed, and size. They'll also examine your pet and tell you if the animal is over- or underweight. [This body composition chart](#) by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) can help you determine whether your dog is at a healthy weight.

Is grain-free dog food bad for dogs?

There's still some debate about grain-free dog food's effect on dog health, and it's worth discussing with your veterinarian.

In 2018, the FDA announced an [investigation](#) into a possible link between grain-free pet food and a form of heart disease called dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM). The agency saw reported cases of DCM increase by up to 500% from January 1, 2018, to April 30, 2019, compared with previous years. Among dogs and cats on dry-food diets, 91% ate grain-free formulas. But to date, [the FDA hasn't confirmed](#) a specific connection between any diet and the cases of DCM. A report updated July 2021 reads, "The FDA does not know the specific connection between these diets and cases of non-hereditary DCM and is continuing to explore the role of genetics, underlying medical conditions, and/or other factors."

Yet independent research suggests grain-free diets are causing some harm. As of September 2021, there have been seven peer-reviewed studies on this disease, [noted Petfoodology's Dr. Lisa M. Freeman](#). Retrospective studies from 2021 confirmed previous results that showed dogs' enlarged hearts shrank and they lived longer when their owners switched them from grain-free commercial dry or "non-traditional" diets to grain-inclusive diets, which

is unusual in hereditary DCM, Freeman said. And small-scale research into dogs with DCM found that those on grain-free diets had higher levels of troponin—a protein in the blood that reflects heart muscle damage—than dogs on grain-inclusive foods, according to a [2021 study](#) in the Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine.

What about raw-food diets?

Supporters of raw-food diets prefer this food over traditional dog food because they consider raw food to be less processed, and they believe it's easier for their pets to digest. Yet along with the CDC and the FDA, the majority of the animal nutrition community has deemed raw meat-based diets unsafe, citing the potential for contamination and nutritional concerns.

The National Academy of Sciences has identified more than 30 nutrients that are essential for dogs, and a diet consisting solely of raw pet food—especially if it's prepared at home—may not provide the total required nutrition. And even though animals may do okay eating raw food, several organizations don't support raw meat-based diets, including the [American Animal Hospital Association](#), the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#)⁴, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), [Pet Partners \(PDF\)](#), the [U.S. Food & Drug Administration](#), and the [World Small Animal Veterinary Association \(PDF\)](#). They cite the high risk of contamination, often nutritionally deficient preparation of home-prepared foods, and lack of evidence supporting the health benefits of any raw-food-based diet (including commercial meals) over traditional pet food. (The [Pet Food Institute](#), composed of dry-, wet-, and raw-food manufacturers, draws a softer line. It highlights safety considerations and studies citing the concerns of raw-food diets, but it ultimately advises speaking with your vet.)

What's more, our experts in vet nutrition said there's no collection of peer-reviewed data supporting the claim that raw food is better than other forms of pet food. Wirecutter also found that studies citing raw-food diets as

beneficial were substantially outnumbered by studies reporting the diets are a health risk, especially to humans handling the food.

Most recently, [a 2021 study](#) published in International Journal of Food Microbiology suggests that antibiotic resistance is a concern in relation to raw-food diets for pets, since these foods are not cooked to eliminate bacteria. Scientists studied 25 brands of commercial pet food and found that all 14 raw dog food varieties contained multidrug-resistant pathogens. Meanwhile, 13 of the 34 types of dry, wet, and semi-moist pet foods had pathogens, with only two having pathogens with multidrug resistance. (AKC points out that [most healthy dogs won't get sick](#) from food containing antibiotic-resistant bacteria, but they can still spread the bacteria to other pets and people.)

What about pet food recalls?

It's worth paying attention to pet food recalls to ensure your pet doesn't get sick. Although recalls can be concerning, you don't have to permanently write off a brand you generally trust based on one report. I've tracked recall reports for a decade, and I have seen recalls affect both boutique brands and huge conglomerates, for problems such as elevated mineral levels, salmonella contamination, or incorrect compliance guidelines. If your brand is recalled, don't panic. Just stop feeding your dog the food, and return it to the store or manufacturer for a refund. You can always ensure your food is safe by checking the [FDA's dog food recall history](#). If your pet food hasn't been recalled but your dog develops digestive upset, or you spot moldy kibble in the bowl, you can report this to the FDA using its [How to Report a Pet Food Complaint](#) page.

This article was edited by Catherine Kast and Jennifer Hunter.

1. Petfoodology is run by veterinarians who have consulted with or received speaker fees from several pet food manufacturers. You can find their disclosure statement at vetnutrition.tufts.edu.

Jump back.

2. There are [fewer than 100](#) credentialed vet nutritionists in the US, so it's unlikely every pet food brand has one employed full time.

Jump back.

3. Rachel Beck says Banfield's vets are "encouraged to recommend any food they think is best for a pet," regardless of whether Mars owns it.

Jump back.

4. Some people [have suggested](#) a conflict of interest on the AVMA's part, which [the association denies](#).

Jump back.

1. José Arce, DVM, [president of the American Veterinary Medical Association](#), email interview, February 3, 2022
2. Parisa Fowles-Pazdro, [founder and CEO of Maxbone](#), email interview, January 31, 2022
3. Danielle Bernal, BVSc, [veterinarian with Wellness Pet Company](#), phone interview, January 31, 2022
4. Karen Fine, DVM, CVA, [holistic veterinarian at Central Animal Hospital](#), email interview, January 28, 2022
5. Darcia Kostiuik, DVM, [senior veterinarian with Champion Petfoods](#), email interview, January 31, 2022
6. Rachel Beck, CVT, PMP, [director of Veterinary Technician Programs at Banfield Pet Hospital](#), email interview, January 28, 2022
7. Jerry Klein, DVM, chief veterinary officer of the American Kennel Club,

email interview, January 28, 2022

8. Chris and Holly Reed, owners of Bayou, [the Giant Schnauzer who won the 2021 AKC National Championship](#), phone interview, February 3, 2022

Get our newsletter

Subscribe to our newsletter to get shopping advice, our favorite gifts, and the best deals on Wirecutter-approved picks sent to your inbox.

About your guide

Kaitlyn Wells is a staff writer covering all things pets and style. She has never met a pet she didn't like, although she can't say the same thing about shoes. Her first picture book, *A Family Looks Like Love*, follows a pup who learns that love, rather than how you look, is what makes a family.