

Choosing a Dog Food

These days it seems there is a new pet food coming on the market every day. Every brand assures you they make the best foods, and some don't hesitate to bad mouth other brands to convince you. On top of that, there is an incredible amount of incorrect information on pet foods circulating on the internet, on TV, and in stores.

All of this makes it very difficult for pet owners to make an informed decision on what food to feed their animals. We have put this document together to give you some unbiased information, so you are better equipped to face the various marketing strategies and self-proclaimed experts.

Forget the commercials

Dog food commercials are generally very well made and very convincing. Unfortunately, when it comes to choosing a food for your dog, the information provided is often inadequate or misleading.

Many companies will tell you only what they want you to know and they will make you believe that they have that miracle ingredient, that is proven to make your dog healthier, have a shiny hair coat, and live longer. They will tell you that the other brands put awful ingredients in their foods, and that your pets will love you more if you feed them their foods. This is all just marketing.

The same goes for the "premium", "human grade ingredients" and "holistic" statements, or the steak, carrots and chicken pictures you see on the bags. These terms are not regulated and they bring you no valuable information to help you judge the quality of the food that's inside.

The guaranteed analysis

The guaranteed analysis includes crude protein, crude fat, crude fibre, and moisture. The guaranteed analysis is of little value in comparing foods. Although it gives a general idea of the nutrient content of a food, it tells nothing about the quality of the nutrients and how well they are absorbed by the animals who eat them.

Ingredient panel

The ingredient statement is a list of ingredients in descending order by weight. The interpretation of ingredient lists is difficult because many key ingredients are added with different moisture contents. For example during fabrication, before meat is integrated into the food, it is transformed into meal by removing most of the water it contains, removing much of its weight in the process. So if the company chooses to list the meat as chicken meat instead of chicken meal, it allows them to have the chicken higher on the ingredient list. Additionally, the ingredient statement does not provide information about the origin, quality and digestibility of the ingredients.

Corn

One of the most common pet food myths is that corn is a “bad” ingredient. In reality, corn is a great nutritional package. It is a source of highly digestible protein, and provides fibres essential to digestive health. It’s also an excellent source of B complex vitamins, vitamin E and vitamin A, as well minerals including zinc and manganese. So don’t believe the myth; corn is not a filler, and does not “go straight through” your pet’s digestive system.

By-products

By-products used in the production of high quality pet foods are nutrient-rich organ meats, blood, connective tissue, mechanically deboned meat, chicken fat and animal lard, caviar (fish eggs), tongue, bone marrow, etc. They provide great nutrition when incorporated in a balanced formula. The myth that by-products are “bad ingredients” is completely unfounded.

Meat – first foods

There is a perception that “meat-first” foods are better, but in fact, as you now know, a food listing meat as the first ingredient may well not be a “meat-first” food in reality.

Because dogs are omnivores and not carnivores, they need a balanced diet of proteins, fats, carbohydrates and vitamins from a variety of sources including meats, vegetables and grains. Meat-first superiority is just another myth.

Why do veterinarians and veterinary technicians recommend, and feed their own pets, veterinary exclusive formulas?

Actually, we choose these formulas because of the people who make them. The things we are looking for in a food company are high quality ingredients, tight quality controls, and formulations backed by extensive research and solid science. We look for a long established company that has developed unmatched expertise in their field. We also appreciate a company that gives us scientific and medical support by providing access to research and specialists for consultation about our patients if needed.

Companies like that are rare, but they are great allies in providing outstanding care for our patients, your pets.

What about the price?

Although price does not tell the entire story, you can be sure that a cheap food is a cheap food. That being said, there are some overpriced, low-quality foods out there as well. Expensive does not always equal quality!

One way many people tend to compare pet foods is to calculate the price per pound. For example, if a 30 lbs bag of Brand A costs \$90, and a 30 lbs bag of Brand B costs \$75, Brand A has a cost of \$3 per pound and Brand B \$2.50 per pound.

This, however, does not tell you the REAL cost of the food. There are at least 2 more factors to consider.

The first is that two 30 lbs bags of food may not contain the same volume of food, because of differences in kibble size and density. For example, Brand A may contain 150 cups of food, and Brand B only 115 cups. This gives you a price of \$0.60 per cup for Brand A, and \$0.65 per cup for Brand B.

The final factor is how much food your pet eats per day, and this can vary according to the nutrition content of each food. Lets say your dog needs to eat 2.5 cups a day of Brand A, or 3 cups a day of Brand B. The REAL cost of each food is then \$1.50 per day for Brand A, and \$1.95 per day for Brand B.

So in the end, the \$90 Brand A bag that seems more expensive, is actually less expensive than the \$75 Brand B bag.

If you want to compare the REAL cost of two pet food bags, you can use this formula:

price of bag / cups per bag X cups your animal eats per day = price per day

Unfortunately, many companies do not write the number of cups per bag on the packaging, so you may not be able to calculate the REAL cost of many foods this way.

Your other option is to try the food out: note the date you open the bag, and the date it's empty. Divide the cost of the bag by the number of days it lasted, and you get the REAL cost per day for that food.

We are not giving you this information to encourage you to buy the cheapest food. As mentioned, cheap foods are low quality products and we do not want to see any pets fed low quality food. Our goal is to give you tools to enable you to compare REAL costs so you can make a more informed decision, taking in consideration all factors including quality, cost, safety, support, provenance, science, research, and health.

What about home cooking?

It is very difficult to achieve a complete and balanced nutrition with home cooked meals. If you really want to cook for your dog, we can supply you with a supplement and cookbook designed by a nutrition specialist that you can use to ensure you give your dog proper nutrition.

What about raw food?

Feeding raw food puts your pet and yourself at risk for food-borne illness such as salmonellosis and intestinal parasites, and is also likely to be unbalanced and unhealthy in the long run. Even worse, feeding bones can cause deadly intestinal obstructions and/or perforations. We do not recommend feeding any dog raw food in any circumstances.

What about grain-free?

Grain-free foods have been linked to heart disease in dogs. This issue is currently under investigation, so for the time being, we recommend that you avoid grain-free foods for your dog.



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