

# The Dog Food Project

*If a dog will not come to you after having looked you in the face, you should go home and examine your conscience. - Woodrow Wilson*



## Common Fallacies of Dog Food Reviews

In the articles on [Ingredients to avoid](#) and [Identifying better products](#), I have already explained what characteristics to look for. In this article I'd like to expand a little bit on actually analyzing dog foods for comparison.

I often see people arguing on various online forums when comparing foods, and of course great points are made, such as type of ingredients used, the extent of variety included, protein and fat percentages and so on.

What saddens me is when dog foods are reviewed and assigned some sort of rating based on a purely arbitrary and often not well researched system. It doesn't help with making decisions based on truly important factors and often causes people to pick one food over another (which may be more suitable for their individual dog) just because it gets a "better" rating.

Reviews generally appear on three different types of websites:

- ones that sell food products and have a vested interest in steering people towards purchasing certain brands over others,
- so called "independent" review sites, often plastered full of ads, drawing in as much traffic as possible from often repeated, popular search keywords, which makes me question their true purpose - giving unbiased information, or just maximizing revenue from advertisements?
- marketing-driven sites that want to sell you print or e-books (at ridiculous prices) that promise to unveil dog food industry "secrets" .

On all of them I've seen some reviews that would actually be funny if it weren't so sad how misguided they actually are and how they can steer dog owners completely wrong:

- A food of truly high quality, with over 95% organic ingredients (manufactured at an APHIS registered plant with organic certification) lumped into the same category as a mediocre mass-market product, based solely on its meat content and the presence of certain grains, taking no other characteristics into consideration. That just doesn't make any sense whatsoever, since ingredient quality can't be changed, but meat content can be tweaked easily by simply enhancing the overall diet by adding fresh or canned meat.
- A food with 70% organic ingredients and not containing any organic meat receives a better rating than a product with 95% organic ingredients (including organic meat), even though it also includes a much lower-quality complement of secondary ingredients and poorer quality supplements, including menadione.
- Foods with certified non-GMO corn were listed in the same category as those with regular or poor quality corn.
- Certified organic foods in the same category as grocery store level/private label brands, despite clear differences in quality.
- Food formulations that were developed in feeding trials under

### General

[Main Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[What Readers say](#)

[Dog Discussions Forum](#)

### Commercial Dry Foods

[Introduction](#)

[Label Information 101](#)

[Identifying better products](#)

[Ingredients to avoid](#)

[Product List](#)

### Specific Product Groups

[Organic Dog Food](#)

[Grain Free Dog Food](#)

[Vegetarian & Vegan Dog Food](#)

### Articles

[Meat vs. Meat Meal \*\*NEW!\*\*](#)

[Choosing the right food](#)

[Feeding Puppies](#)

[Feeding Senior Dogs](#)

[Canine Obesity](#)

[Is too much protein harmful?](#)

[Grading kibble - easily?](#)

["Five Star Foods"](#)

### Other Diet Topics

[Questions on Diet](#)

[Myths about Feeding](#)

[The Yuck Factor](#)

[Where the money goes](#)

[Natural Supplementation](#)

[Menadione \(Vitamin K3\)](#)

[Nutrient Requirements](#)

[Links & Resources](#)

### Nutrition Primer

[Nutrient Overview](#)

[Water](#)

[Protein](#)

[Fat](#)

Carbohydrates
Fiber
Vitamins
Minerals
Essential Fatty Acids
Probiotics



close cooperation with breeders (NOT AAFCO-style feeding trials with laboratory populations) were ranked lower than so-called "five star" foods that never underwent any feeding trials at all and are purely based on what looks good "on paper".

- Products marketed by companies who don't disclose important information about their ingredients and manufacturing processes and products manufactured by co-packers instead of a company-owned facility were ranked higher than dog foods made by manufacturers at their own facilities, with decades of experience, a stellar record of ingredient quality and product trustworthiness.

On the flip side, only products with a wide variety of ingredients and fairly high in fat tend to get good ratings, despite not necessarily being suitable for the needs of every dog out there, as discussed in [Grading Kibble - easily?](#).

Analyzing dog food means to me "focusing on analysis", while comparing products

- in groups with similar characteristics and purposes, addressing specific nutritional needs (instead of comparing apples and oranges so to speak),
- based on factual numbers, not just guesswork (even though it's time consuming and may \*gasp\* involve talking to the manufacturer),
- critically evaluating possibly incorrect and/or outdated research,
- with a solid understanding of nutritional principles, ingredient definitions and purposes, instead of following hearsay and hype,
- based on a consistent unit for daily intake, such as for example per 1,000 kcal,
- and of course it helps if the person reviewing a food actually bases their opinion on the correct official AAFCO definitions of ingredients instead of on incorrect assumptions about what a food ingredient may be (e.g. "brewers rice" is **not** a "waste product of the alcohol industry" but simply broken grains of rice).

In addition to that, we must also take special consideration when comparing foods manufactured in different countries, under differing legislation. The information here on the Dog Food Project is based on AAFCO legislation and ingredient definitions, and it would for example be inappropriate to apply them to foods manufactured elsewhere in the world and not sold on the U.S. market, with ingredient lists following completely different legislation ? for example what AAFCO describes as "poultry meal" or "cereal grains" can be a product of entirely different quality and composition in another country.

Just to address some of the common, tired, old misconceptions once again:

### **"Corn and wheat are bad ingredients, they are hard to digest and common causes for allergies."**

Unless an individual dog is sensitive or allergic to corn or wheat, they are no better and no worse than other cereal grains, as long as they are used as a source of carbohydrates and not as a main source of protein, especially in combination with excessive use of gluten as another main ingredient. Depending on an individual dog's needs,

some may be more suitable than others, for example in cases where a dog is gluten intolerant, barley is especially unsuitable, despite generally getting "better ratings" from uninformed sources. If you'd like to see a comparison of nutrients, please click [here](#).

### **"Brown rice is better than white rice."**

While it is true that brown rice is less processed than white rice, which type is "better" depends once again on the dog eating the food. Brown rice is much higher in fiber and ash than white rice, which has had its bran layer removed, making it easier to digest and less irritating for the sensitive stomach.

Depending on the desired nutritional characteristics, a food product may contain both brown and white rice in certain proportions, and listing them both is not necessarily "splitting".

### **"Beet pulp is a poor quality filler and should be avoided because it commonly causes problems, including allergies and ear infections."**

Beet pulp gets its bad reputation undeservedly, which is the reason it? s not listed under [Ingredients to avoid](#) on this site.

It is a gentle, beneficial source of fiber that is not only generally very well tolerated, but it also has specific properties that make it suitable as a source of nutrition for the beneficial bacteria that reside in the intestinal tract (in a supplement you would call this a "prebiotic"). The same people who malign beet pulp also often state rice bran is a better fiber supplement, but in truth it's a much harsher kind of fiber and may lead to vomiting and diarrhea in sensitive dogs or if it is used in too large amounts.

In all the time I have been consulting for dog owners on nutrition, I have actually not had a single case where I pinpointed beet pulp as the cause of problems, whereas the opposite is true for rice bran.

Almost all of the sugar is removed from the beet pulp, what's left is only about 1/5 the amount of sugar that you would find in a serving of fresh carrots of equal size. It is also colorless and does not make a dog's coat turn red, like urban legends claim.

The manufacturers of quality pet food do not include more than about 5% of beet pulp in their foods, which is enough to get the benefits of this fiber without it becoming nothing but a filler.

The claim that beet pulp is an "unnatural" ingredient is often brought up, but those who argue this seem to forget that it is also not natural that dogs eat commercially produced dry food that contains rendered meat meals, a carbohydrate percentage of generally 40% and more, and has a moisture content of only around 10% as opposed to a more natural 60-70%. Added fiber is required to make such formulations work for the pets who eat a dry diet as well as for manufacturing.

### **"Avocado oil should never be a dog food ingredient, since avocados are toxic to**

## dogs."

The only parts of an avocado that are toxic are the wood, bark, leaves, pit and skin - in other words, you should not give your dog unsupervised access to areas where avocado trees grow, or let him ingest any of their materials even when supervised, but the flesh of the avocado fruit, and its oil, are fine as long as an individual is not allergic or sensitive.

## "Foods that include fat among the first four ingredients can cause bloat."

I'm aware of the Purdue Bloat Study, but the claim that foods with a fat or oil ingredient among the first 4 ingredients cause bloat in predisposed dogs makes absolutely no sense, and in my opinion it was unprofessional and illogical to include a statement to that extent with the findings of the study. Let me explain in more detail:

If the statement were true, it wouldn't matter if you fed a bloat-prone dog a dry food with 10, 20 or 30% fat, as long as the ingredient list were manipulated in a way that pushes the major fat ingredient past position number 4 in a given list.

Food ingredients are listed by weight before processing, so what the top 4 ingredients are depends on the formulation. An example:

	Food A	Food B
Protein %	25	25
Fat %	15	15
Fiber %	5	5
Moisture %	10	10
Ingredient #1	Meat (20%)	Meat Type 1 (10%)
Ingredient #2	Grain Type 1 (30%)	Meat Type 2 (10%)
Ingredient #3	Grain Type 2 (30%)	Grain Type 1 (20%)
Ingredient #4	Fat	Grain Type 2 (20%)
Ingredient #5		Grain Type 3 (20%)
Ingredient #6		Fat

You see these two foods have an identical content of protein and fat, per Guaranteed Analysis as well as actual ingredient inclusion. However, just because food B contains a higher number of ingredients, fat is pushed from ingredient number 4 to number 6.

Now if that study had said that problems occurred if a food had a particular fat percentage, it would be an entirely different story and actually make sense!

## **"Watch out for ingredient splitting."**

To continue from the above paragraph on the number a particular item takes on the ingredient list ? I can't help but notice how many people are ready to point fingers and gripe about ingredient splitting when they see for example different components of the same type of grain in a food, but then point out how great it is that a product lists three or four meat types or more as the first few ingredients.

Do they really think that a food necessarily has a higher meat content just because a larger variety of meat types are listed? **Why the double standard?**

Fact is that unless a manufacturer actually discloses the meat content of a product, you have no reliable way of determining which of two products with the same guaranteed analysis has the higher meat inclusion - **unless** the presence of a plant based protein booster (e.g. corn gluten meal, potato protein, rice protein concentrate) as a main ingredient gives it away.

## **"It's better if whole eggs are listed instead of egg product."**

Yet another statement based on assumption rather than factual research.

The definition of "egg product" per AAFCO is "Product obtained from egg graders, egg breakers, and/or hatchery operations that is dehydrated, handled as liquid or frozen. These shall be labeled as per USDA regulations governing eggs and egg products (9CFR, Part 59). This product shall be free of shells or other non-egg materials except in such amounts which might occur unavoidably in good processing practices, and contain a maximum ash content of 6% on a dry matter basis."

There is no AAFCO definition for "eggs", and just like other items for which no specific definitions exist (e.g. various fruits and vegetables etc.), they may be added in dehydrated, dried and then re-hydrated, or fresh form even without any additional descriptive terms. So just because a food lists "eggs" instead of "egg product" in the ingredient list doesn't mean they have to be fresh or whole, or if they are whole, they are not necessarily of better quality.

Last but not least, just like meat meal that is already concentrated before being added to the kibble "dough", a dehydrated egg product of good quality adds more protein to a food formulation than eggs that still contain a lot of moisture. As always, the quality of the ingredient depends on the manufacturer's choice.

## **"Fresh vegetables/fruits are better than dried"**

In principle I do agree, but once again as a consumer you don't necessarily know for sure whether these were added fresh, or dried and then rehydrated, simply because there is no official AAFCO definition for things like carrots, peas, spinach, blueberries, and so on. Without additional details from the manufacturer we can only speculate.

In my opinion a commercial food should not be rated on the type of fruits and veggies it includes or doesn't include because the amount is so negligible that there isn't any real benefit anyway. All ingredients are processed somehow during manufacturing and are in the end in a processed form.

Adding fresh, finely chopped or grated raw fruits and vegetables (no grapes, raisins or onions please) to your dog's meals will add much more nutritional value than a few pieces added to a commercial formulation, so pick the kibble that suits your individual dog's needs the best, no matter if it contains some "gimmick ingredients" and enhance it yourself!

### **"The addition of glucosamine and chondroitin is a plus"**

More gimmicks! Please consider that in order to get enough glucosamine or chondroitin into your dog to actually have a therapeutic effect you would have to massively overfeed and the poor animal would be obese in no time.

As an example, a 50 lb dog with light to moderate joint problems may need 500 to 750 mg of glucosamine per day. On average, fortified foods contain around 50-100 mg of glucosamine per cup, at around 350 to 450 kcal per cup. To get close to the 500 mg target dose, you'd have to feed 5-10 cups of food, supplying anywhere from 2,250 to 3,500 kcal per day - over double the energy requirement of even a moderately active 50 pound dog!

Your wallet and your dog's joints (and waistline!) would be better off choosing a food for its main nutritional characteristics and adding a high-quality supplement for joint support.

These are just a handful of misconceptions I hear or read about on a daily basis.

In closing I'd like to say that it would be a major setback if every manufacturer out there would suddenly only produce "cookie cutter" products that do not include certain ingredients such as beef, corn, barley, soy (as whole soybeans, not soy industry byproducts) etc. - we need those alternatives for the dogs out there who don't fall into the largest section of the nutrition bell curve - even if some people think that some of those products don't fall into the "five star" category.

Please base your choices on your dog's needs rather than on some arbitrary review status.

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