

The Dog Food Project

In moments of joy, all of us wished we possessed, a tail we could wag. - W. H. Auden



Meat vs. Meat Meal

The meat ingredients in dog food are among the topics that cause the most confusion among pet owners. Is "fresh" meat better than meat meal? Is all meat meal bad? What about "human grade"?

I'd like to address the latter first. Frankly, there is no legal definition whatsoever for the term "human grade" when it comes to pet food, and it holds no weight. If you don't believe me, contact the FDA and AAFCO and ask. I know it has become a major buzz word since the pet food recall disaster in 2007, and it's widely abused to mislead consumers.

On the other hand, the designations "from USDA inspected facilities" and "passed USDA inspection for human consumption" do have merit. If a pet food manufacturer makes claims in regards to human grade ingredients, ask for proof that they meet **these** criteria before taking their word that it's "human grade".

"Inspected for human consumption" may sound impressive, but it doesn't mean the product passed inspection - in fact, it might have been rejected for various reasons that make it unsuitable for human consumption and that's why it ended up being used for pet food.

As far as I am currently informed, only one company has won a court decision in the US to be able to sell their foods as "human food grade", and unlike any other, these are manufactured from ingredients made and packaged for the human food industry, at a facility that only processes products sold for human consumption. Anything pet-food related wouldn't even be permitted on the premises. The first time these products actually come in contact with anything made for the pet market is when they are delivered to the pet supply stores that sell them.

"Meat"

AAFCO Definitions:

Meat

"Meat is the clean flesh derived from slaughtered mammals and is limited to that part of the striate muscle which is skeletal or that which is found in the tongue, in the diaphragm, in the heart, or in the esophagus; with or without the accompanying and overlying fat and the portions of the skin, sinew, nerve, and blood vessels which normally accompany the flesh. It shall be suitable for use in animal food. If it bears a name descriptive of its kind, it must correspond thereto."

Poultry

"Poultry is the clean combination of flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from the parts or whole carcasses of poultry or a combination thereof, exclusive of feathers, heads, feet and entrails. It shall be suitable for use in animal food. If it bears a name descriptive of its kind, it must correspond thereto. If the bone has been removed, the process may be so designated by use of the appropriate feed term."

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Fiber
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Minerals
Essential Fatty Acids
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Fish

There is no AAFCO definition for fish, either generic or by species.

Pros:

* Less processed than meals, only one cooking process to finish dry food since it is added raw to the kibble "dough".

Cons:

* Contributes far less concentrated animal protein to a product, since 60-75% of the weight is water, which is removed during the manufacturing process. * Only a limited amount can be used to prevent processing equipment from gumming up. According to my interviews with manufacturers of dry food, the use of fresh meat in a formulation must be limited to a maximum of about 35% by weight, including the weight of the water. This means that dry dog food using fresh meat sources only are comparatively low in meat content and rather high in carbohydrates. To boost the protein content somewhat, such products sometimes contain concentrated forms of plant-based proteins, such as potato protein, pea protein, corn gluten meal etc. - which, while not necessarily of bad quality, are not species appropriate for dogs and shouldn't be what you pay for in a quality product.

"Meal"

There is no such thing as "human grade meat meal", since meat meal is never produced for human consumption and the facilities producing it are not licensed or certified to manufacture human-edible products that meet FDA standards. If you are looking for the closest comparable thing, it would be something like meats that are freeze-dried after cooking, such as for backpacking and emergency food rations. These are made by manufacturers whose processing facilities fall under the regulatory requirements of the human food industry though, not the pet food industry!

However, this doesn't mean that all meat meal is of poor quality and should be avoided. Just like with any other dog food ingredient, there are many different levels of quality, and by law pet food manufacturers are not permitted to make any statements on the product packaging or in the ingredient list in regards to the quality of what is used.

As a simple example, which I have already cited in other places on this site, "chicken meal" could be a product made only from high-quality, deboned chicken breasts, much like the kind you would find in a grocery store; or it could be made from the entire carcasses of spent egg farm hens at the end of their productive cycle. These hens put all their energy into producing eggs and do not have a lot of muscle on their skeletal frames, so you have a fairly high ratio of skin and bone vs. quality muscle meat. One defining characteristic of a high quality meat meal is a low ash content, which means the proportion of bone to meat is low.

AAFCO Definitions:

"Meat meal is the rendered product from mammal tissues, exclusive of any added blood, hair, hoof, horn, hide trimmings, manure, stomach and rumen contents except in such amounts as may occur unavoidably in good processing practices. It shall not contain added extraneous materials not provided for by this definition. The Calcium (Ca) level shall not exceed the actual level of Phosphorus (P) by more than 2.2 times. It shall not contain more than 12% Pepsin indigestible residue and not more than 9% of the crude protein in the product shall be

pepsin indigestible. The label shall include guarantees for minimum crude protein, minimum crude fat, maximum crude fiber, minimum Phosphorus (P) and minimum and maximum Calcium (Ca). If the product bears a name descriptive of its kind, composition or origin, it must correspond thereto."

"Poultry meal is the dry rendered product from a combination of clean flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from the parts of whole carcasses of poultry or a combination thereof, exclusive of feathers, heads, feet, and entrails. It shall be suitable for use in animal food. If it bears a name descriptive of its kind, it must correspond thereto."

"Fish meal is the clean, dried, ground tissue of undecomposed whole fish or fish cuttings, either or both, with or without the extraction of part of the oil. If it contains more than 3% salt (NaCl), the amount of salt must constitute a part of the product name, provided that in no case must the salt content of this product exceed 7%. The label shall include guarantees for minimum crude protein, minimum crude fat, maximum crude fiber, minimum Phosphorus (p) and minimum and maximum calcium (Ca). If it bears a name descriptive of its kind, it must correspond thereto."

Pros

* Contributes a more concentrated amount of animal protein to a product since it contains only about 10% moisture, making the food more species appropriate. * No limit on the amount that can be used in a food formula, which permits the creation of high-protein, low-carb dry foods.

Cons:

* More processed than fresh meat, already cooked and dried once before added to kibble "dough" and cooked again.

So what should you look for?

Let me begin by stating that I personally am not in favor of feeding dogs dry kibble, period. Of all available commercial food types, with the exception of semi moist food (which is even worse), it's the kind that is the furthest removed from food in its natural state, and the most affected by various steps of processing. Think of it this way: would you like to eat only "Cup O' Noodle" type products without as much as added water for the rest of your life, even if they were of really good quality, bought at a health food store, and possibly made from organic ingredients? Never again bite into a fresh, crisp apple, or enjoy a nice salad?

That being said, I do realize that for most dog owners dry food is the least expensive and time consuming way of feeding, and with fewer and fewer people even cooking for themselves and their families, it's not going to go away. (Even so, it's great to see that better, less processed food products are becoming more widely available - just watch those ingredients, quality differs, just like with dry food!)

Instead of just speaking out against commercial dry food altogether, and leaving dog owners without answers and choices, I prefer providing this free resource so people can make the best possible choices for themselves, while still improving their dogs' health by feeding better quality food.

In my opinion, as long as high quality ingredients are used, it's not as

important whether a dry food contains only fresh meat, or only meat meal, or some of both - what's far more important is your dog's overall diet.

If you feed your dog mostly dry food, with nothing or very little else added - like most people do - I recommend looking for a product that does contain one or more concentrated sources of animal protein in form of meal (either by itself, or in combination with fresh meats). This kibble will make up almost all of your dog's food intake, and if you feed a food that only contains fresh meat, the actual proportion of meat to grains or other carbohydrate sources is very low - and thus species inappropriate for an animal that is a meat eater by nature, with a digestive tract designed to process mainly meats and fat.

If you are willing to add a good proportion of canned food (or fresh meat), this is less critical. It is absolutely possible to combine a kibble that's fairly low in animal protein with fresh meat or canned food containing 95-100% meat. The resulting combination has the advantage of adding less-processed meat to the overall diet. It is also a great way to enhance limited-formulation dry food for allergic and sensitive individuals, which often is rather low in protein.

Of course you aren't strictly limited to the use of canned food containing 95-100% meat, and this is not to say that canned food containing some rice, or oats, or potatoes/sweet potatoes along with meat isn't suitable - just keep in mind that your goal is to increase the proportion of meat and less processed foods in your dog's overall diet.

If you'd rather not spend your money on canned dog food, add some fresh meat and other fresh foods! You can find some excellent guidelines in the book [Dr. Pitcairn's New Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats](#), or if you prefer a more individual approach, [feel free to contact me for a personal consultation](#).

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