

How to Decipher Pet Food Labels



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Just as you check the labels on your family's food, it's crucial to check the labels on your dog's food. Not all ingredients are created equal – and not all dog foods utilize ingredients in the same way. Part of responsible dog ownership is ensuring that your dog's nutrition is targeted to his or her specific needs.

The first step in reading a pet food label is to strip away the marketing claims. Ignore the bold colorful phrases that adorn the package; instead, focus on the facts. The only exception: Be sure that the package boasts adherence to the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), an organization that regulates the pet food industry.

Next, check the order of the ingredients. This is one of the best ways to determine the quality of the food. A few key considerations:



- Just like ingredient labels for human food, the ingredients on a package of dog food are listed in order of weight, highest to lowest. If the label lists corn first then meat, you know that corn is the most prevalent ingredient, followed by meat.
- Read the entire list. Sometimes the list can be misleading at first glance. For example, if the label lists corn near the top and later lists ground corn, cornmeal, or other forms of corn, then it's in a greater abundance than first met the eye.
- Consider the specifics. Not all ingredients are created equal. The very specific name of the ingredient will indicate the quality. For instance, meat is a higher quality ingredient than meat by-products. Human-grade meat is the best.
- Check the additives, which appear toward the bottom of the list. As in people food, the longer, more complex ingredient names are often chemical additives. Choose a product with fewer preservatives, food colorings, and flavor additives.

After you review the ingredient list, glance at the feeding directions. Use these guidelines as a rough starting point to determine if the appropriate quantities meet your dog's dietary needs. Adjust the recommendations as required by your dog's activity level and weight.

Once you feel confident that the ingredients meet your pet's needs, there are a few other things to consider before you make your purchase.

- Don't rely on the Guaranteed Analysis. While it's a good place to start when evaluating a new food, the percentages measure crude levels of the ingredients, regardless of the quality of the ingredient. Think back to the different types of meats that could be included. So, depending on the quality levels of those ingredients, the levels can be misleading.
- Be prepared with a basic understanding of nutrition claims. For example, "premium" and "gourmet" are not regulated terms, so it's better to read the ingredient list than to rely on those claims.
- Natural is not the same as organic. The term organic applies to how the individual ingredients were grown or produced. Natural means that the overall product is free from additives.

Though understanding pet food labels can seem tricky, it just takes a little practice before you're reading and understanding them clearly. As always, check with your vet to ensure the food you select meets your dog's nutritional requirements. If you notice any weight loss or gain or if your dog doesn't seem to tolerate the food, common sense and responsible care outweigh the science behind the labels.

by Maggie Marton

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