

How to decide what food to feed your dog

Such a simple sounding topic that is sure to elicit a strong emotional response in dog owners. I was recently stopped at a local pet food store by another patron and she asked me to help her find a good food, apparently one of the staff (who is a certified vet tech) told her that I know more about pet nutrition than herself and she received animal nutrition in her program.

Why is that? I am certainly not a vet or a vet tech. The reason: I have made it my business to understand what is the best way to ensure good nutrition for my pets. If I can do this anyone can and everyone should.

Responsible pet owners strive to take good care of their pets and many times rely on the advice of friends, vets and the media when making food selections, unfortunately this does not always yield good food choices. Just like choosing what foods for you and your family the old adage garbage in garbage out applies to our pets. Unless your friends have researched pet nutrition they may not be the most reputable source. The advertisements are designed for 1 thing, to induce you to purchase their product, not necessarily to provide you with a good product. As far as vet recommendations, no matter how awesome your vet is the ugly truth is they get very little nutritional education in their academic curriculum. What they do get is TONS of money and incentives from certain food companies both to their university programs and then later in their practice. I have no doubt that they believe that these companies produces a premium food. Unfortunately when you start to look at the labels this myth becomes obvious.

The need to choose a premium food is probably more important for our pets then it is for us. We get a variety of items in our diet and are able to make of nutritional deficits by doing this, not so with our pets, then gen get the same food day in and day out, so if there food is not of good quality then they are really at risk. Issues such as skin and coat problems, poor bone maturation, gastric issues, seizures, poor teeth, excessive tartar build up, autoimmune issues and even cancers can be the result of poor diet or certainly can complicate these problems if they already exist.

So now what? How do we choose a premium food for our beloved family members? It is not as hard as it sounds, you simply have to keep a few concepts in mind and read the labels, much as we do when making food selections for ourselves.

Here are some helpful hints

- 1) When possible shop at well used independent pet supply stores. The staff there is generally more educated in animal nutrition. The next best choice would be to go to

chain pet specialty stores and many times the smaller pet supply specialty stores- those folks can only offer a limited variety so they tend to choose those of higher quality.

2) Read the label!!!!

a. Ingredients panel

a.i. The ingredients are listed from largest weight to smallest, the 1st 2-3 ingredients will give you a HUGE hint as to the quality of the food.

a.i.1. Look for lots of animal protein at the top of the list

a.i.2. Make sure the animal protein is listed by NAME, ie chicken, beef, lamb ect instead of just ANIMAL MEAT.

a.i.3. Any animal protein meals should also be named, not just animal meal, AVOID MEAT MEAL OR POULTRY MEAL.

a.i.4. Also if the protein sources are listed below the 2nd ingredient, beware, that means that the majority of the food is NOT from a protein source.

a.i.5. AVOID MEAT OR POULTRY BYPRODUCTS- Byproducts are considered very low grade and they are not processed or stored as carefully and run an increased risk of contamination.

a.i.6. AVOID a generic FAT source. Such as animal fat, this could include even used animal grease from a restaurant. Poultry fat is a bit better but the best is chicken fat or duck fat.

a.i.7. AVOID added sweeteners, these are added to foods with lots of grain and little protein to induce the dog to eat it.

a.i.8. Avoid Artificial Colors, Flavors, or Preservatives. Such common artificial ingredients are BHA, BHT and ethoxyquin and have been linked to many health issues.

a.i.9. Choose Natural Preservatives. Common naturals are tocopherols (which is Vitamin E), Vitamin C, and Rosemary extract. (THE ONLY EXCEPTION TO ROSEMARY IS IF YOUR DOG SUFFERS FROM SIEZURES DISORDER AS THIS CAN DROP THE Seizure THRESHOLD and allow your dog to have a seizure or more seizures).

- a.i.10. Whole fruits, vegetables and grains. Fresh, unprocessed food contain nutrients and vitamins in their purest form and therefore can be used more readily by the body. Many of the really good stuff like antioxidants, and fragile vitamins can be easily destroyed by over-processing. A few by-products are fine like tomato pumice, or a type of grain bran is fine. Avoid things like corn gluten as it is simply the water used to wash over corn and will artificially raise the protein level in the food but is not easily digestible for our pets. Also corn has been associated with increased skin allergies in some dogs.
- a.i.11. Grain Free, you will see lots of food that advertise this, for dogs with allergies, digestive issues and Seizure disorder this is a good choice. Generally sweet potatoes are used for the carbohydrate component and a high quality carb- so this food can be used for all most dogs. Make sure the protein level is not too high if your dog is older or has some kidney issues, best to check with your vet for this if unsure.

3) Review the Guaranteed Analysis Section

- a. This section goes over minimum and maximum amounts of protein and fat. Get an idea of what amounts of protein and fat is good for your dog. If you have a very active dog then higher protein and fat may be required. Also if you are feeding a very low protein/fat food and want to improve it don't jump too fast to the higher food or tummy issues will be an issue. I always rec feeding a 50/50 mix for a week or so then slowly decrease the amount of old food over to new after that. Let your dog's stools and activity be the guide here.
- 4) Make sure to check the best by date and even the production date if both are listed. Always a good idea to purchase the freshest food possible.

Bottom line is look at your pet is the coat sleek and healthy or spares and brittle (of course this varies some from breed to breed). Do they have nice muscle mass, are their movements free and easy, how is their activity level, is there a layer of fat over the ribs, hip base of neck and spine (for more information here see our doc. on "healthy weight for your dog". If these things are present maybe you need to change the food . It is also rec to change off foods every few months, can alternate between 2 or 3 brands that meet the quality food criteria, that way if 1

food is missing some element you have the chance of getting it from another—remember how we mix up our diet for the same reason.

Remember every dog is different, some more active some less, some puppies, adults and seniors so not just 1 food will work for all. Puppies need more protein and fat, seniors less of both. Some breeds are very active and they require more of both as well.

Most folks will just ask—OK< just tell me what to buy.. I can list a few good foods in no certain order that meet the above criteria, but knowing how to find a good food will do you the most good. Remember the adage: You can feed a man for a night if you give him a fish, he can feed himself for a lifetime if you teach him to fish

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Here are just a few premium foods that you see frequently in pet stores but again this list is not exhaustive.

Chicken Soup for the Dog Lovers Soul

Taste of the Wild all varieties and are Grain free

Merrick brand dog food, have several varieties. Natura pet products (California Natural, Evo, Healthwise, Innova and Karma)

Natural Balance, all varieties

Natures variety (several varieties including Instinct and Prairie)

Drs Fosters and Smith (all varieties)

Eukanuba some varieties (Naturally wild, and pure formulas wild)

3 Dog Bakery (all varieties)

Solid Gold Products

Wellness Brand foods

Canidae

Avo (all varieties)

Evanger (all varieties)

Science Diet Ideal Balance (note this is the only brands of Science diet that meets the previous mentioned criteria and a new product for them).

Nutro Ultra (all varieties)

Again this list is not inclusive, but just listed some of the foods that are available at the local pet food chains and feed stores, when in doubt, read the labels.