

# Frequently Asked Questions about General Pet Nutrition

## What is the best food to feed my pet

There is no “best diet”, despite all the marketing claims to the contrary. Every pet is unique and the goal is to find the best diet for the individual pet. Expense doesn’t necessarily equal quality. There are some inexpensive diets that have years of rigorous scientific testing behind them and some very expensive diets that are lacking in vital nutrients or based on unsound science. Larger companies generally have more stringent quality control protocols, employ expert nutritionists and food scientists, and strive to increase our collective nutrition knowledge through research. Smaller manufacturers may have less control over ingredient quality, perform less laboratory testing and are less likely to employ full or part time veterinary nutritionists.

A good rule of thumb is that if the marketing of a product sounds too good to be true, the manufacturer cites studies or research that they cannot provide to you or makes claims that cannot be substantiated, then that’s a red flag that the diet should be avoided.

## How can I pick a good diet to feed my pet?

Consumers should look for foods made by reputable companies with long histories of producing quality diets. Diets that have an Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) statement on the label saying that the diets have undergone “animal feeding trials” for the appropriate life stage are generally preferable to diets that are “formulated [by computer] to meet” AAFCO nutrient profiles for that life stage. This distinction is particularly important for puppy and kitten diets as well as diets produced by newer and smaller companies with less experience in diet formulation. Ideally, manufacturers should be engaging in both internal and external (through a university for example) research to both improve their products and increase our collective nutrition knowledge. Advertisements and websites should not contain unverifiable claims, perpetuate nutrition myths or promote products solely by bashing other manufacturers’ products. Most importantly, the diet you select for your pet should be the one that they do well on!

## Is the ingredient list a good way to determine the quality of a pet food?

Although ingredient lists are commonly used by lay people to determine the quality of pet foods, this approach has many pitfalls and is very subjective to intentional manipulation by the food manufacturers. Ingredients are listed on labels in order of weight, including water, so ingredients with high water content (like fresh meats and vegetables) are going to be listed higher than similar amounts of dry ingredients even though they may contribute fewer nutrients to the overall diet. Additionally, ingredients from the same source (such as chicken meat, chicken fat, chicken by-product meal) can be split into component parts, further complicating assessment.

Pets require nutrients, not ingredients; a diet full of great sounding ingredients can be less nutritious than a diet containing less appealing (to people) ingredients. Some manufacturers may add ingredients to diets solely for marketing purposes, to increase the appeal of the diet to consumers. These ingredients may have unproven benefits, be present in minuscule amounts and provide nothing to the diet but added expense. More ingredients also mean more quality control (and more time and expense) is necessary to ensure that the finished product adheres to the desired nutrient formulation.

It is also important to understand that the phrase “human grade” has no legal meaning in the pet food industry. Once a product is destined for inclusion in pet food, it is no longer fit for human consumption by definition. Moreover, ingredients sourced from the human food chain are not necessarily any more nutritious, wholesome, or safe than ingredients initially destined for pet food. Therefore, manufacturer’s claims of “human grade” ingredients should not be over interpreted.

## I’ve heard that raw diets prevent and/or solve a lot of health problems in pets. Is this true?

Despite anecdotal reports from pet owners and even some veterinarians, there is currently no evidence that raw diets offer any benefits over cooked diets. However, there is substantial evidence that these diets may be associated with dental

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fractures, bacterial and parasitic infections and other health concerns in pets. There is also potential risk to people, especially those that are immunocompromised such as young children, the elderly and patients receiving immune modifying drugs or who have cancer. Pets that eat contaminated raw diets have been demonstrated to shed viable pathologic organisms in their feces and it is likely that areas that they frequent are also contaminated. As numerous recalls and some pathogen surveys in the last few years have proven, all raw meat, regardless of source, should be considered to be contaminated until proven otherwise. For these reasons, the Delta Society has banned raw fed pets from participating in their pet therapy programs.

In addition to food safety concerns, nearly all home-prepared raw diets and many commercially available raw diets are deficient in essential nutrients. It is also common for commercial raw diets to be very high in fat, which may not be tolerated by some animals.

### **My friend says that grains are bad for dogs, is this correct?**

Whole grains, rather than being “fillers”, contribute valuable nutrients including vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and fiber to diets while helping to keep the fat and calories lower than if animal products were used in their place. Even refined grains such as white rice can have beneficial health implications depending on the type of diet and the pet. The vast majority of dogs (and cats!) are very efficient at digesting and utilizing nutrients from grains. While some dogs are allergic to specific grains, these allergies are no more common than allergies to animal proteins such as chicken, beef and dairy and tend to reflect the prevalence of the ingredient in commercial diets rather than enhanced antigenicity.

It is becoming more common in the saturated pet food market for manufacturers to perpetuate myths to sell diets and increase market share. “Grain-free” diets are often an example of this strategy. Many of these diets merely substitute highly refined starches such as those from potatoes or tapioca (cassava) in place of grains. These ingredients often provide fewer nutrients and less fiber than whole grains, while costing more.

### **I read online that by-products can contain hair, hooves and floor sweepings, is this true?**

By-products are commonly vilified, often by diet manufacturers trying to carve out market share for themselves by offering diets that do not contain them. By-products (mainly organ meats and entrails) often provide more nutrients than muscle meats on a per weight basis and are important components and even delicacies of human diets in other countries. The term “by-product” comes from the fact that they are the leftovers from animal carcasses once the desirable (for Americans) muscle meat has been removed. AAFCO definitions of mammal by-products specifically exclude hair, hooves, horn, hide trimmings, manure and intestinal contents, as well as anything that is not specifically part of the carcass (floor sweepings for example). Like all ingredients, the quality of by-products can vary, so it is important to select manufacturers who have stringent internal quality control standards.

### **What is the best diet for a growing puppy or kitten?**

Growing kittens should be fed a kitten diet or an all life stages formula until one year of age. Growing small and medium breed puppies should be fed a puppy or all life stages formula until one year of age. Large and giant breed puppies (adult size >50 lbs) should be fed a diet specifically designed for large breed puppies until 12-18 months of age. It is ideal if these products have passed AAFCO feeding trials rather than just being “formulated to meet” the nutrient profiles for growth. This information can be found on the product label.

Throughout growth, it's important to keep your puppy or kitten lean to reduce risks for health problems and to optimize his or her lifespan. Be aware that spaying or neutering your pet reduces his or her calorie requirements so it's important to reduce calories at the time of surgery to reduce the risks for obesity. We are happy to help you select appropriate diets for your breeding animals or growing puppies and kittens.

*Info courtesy of Cummings Veterinary Medical Center at Tufts University*



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