

The Canine Diet – Food for Thought

Deciding the best diet for our dogs has only gotten more confusing as the types and varieties have proliferated. Commercial or homemade? Cooked or raw? Well, chew on this...

Deciphering Commercial Labeling

The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) is a governing agency that promotes uniformity in feed regulations and labeling and substantiates whether a food is nutritionally adequate. A food deemed “complete and balanced” must prove adequacy in sustaining puppies (“growth”), adult dogs (“maintenance”), gestating or lactating females, or “all life stages” (all of the above).

Substantiation can be achieved in one of three ways: through a series of feeding trials that last a specified amount of time, by meeting the AAFCO nutritional profiles for nutrient requirements and, finally, by approximating the nutritional profile of an already approved “family member”. Each standard has its strengths and weaknesses, so your best bet is to read the ingredient list of each food to determine the quality of the ingredients it contains.

The Ingredient List on a Commercial Label

While there is a huge selection of foods out there, there are a few basic tenets which will help reduce the field substantially:

- 🐾 Look for foods that have a meat source (e.g. “beef”) *first* in the ingredient list.
- 🐾 In dry food, a whole meat (e.g. “chicken”) contains a lot of water, which means that it’s ideal if the second or third ingredient in the list is a specific meat *meal* (e.g. “chicken meal”). If the only other animal protein is much later in the list, it does *not* actually contain much animal protein.
- 🐾 Canned foods need liquid for processing. It is better if this be the second item (not first) in the ingredient list, and it’s usually tastier to pets if broth is used rather than water.
- 🐾 Animal proteins tend to be tastier *and* easier to digest than plant proteins.
- 🐾 Avoid foods that contain by-products (either specific or general) early in the ingredient list.
- 🐾 Look for foods with whole grains and vegetables; avoid fractions (“brown rice” is better than “wheat gluten”).
- 🐾 Some animals have adverse reactions to grains. If your pup’s stool tends to be loose or he has itchy skin, try a grain-free diet.
- 🐾 Avoid foods with artificial colors.

Some Facts when Considering a Home-Prepared Diet

While raw and home-prepared diets can have miraculous benefits in resolving a multitude of health problems, it is not a decision to be taken lightly. Do your homework; do research on the internet and in the wealth of books available on the topic.

The key to any homemade diet is *variety*. Variety will ensure that your dog receives all the nutrients he needs over a period of days and weeks. Each and every meal need not be balanced and complete; rather, balance over time must be achieved. There must be a variety of animal protein sources as well as a variety of animal parts (organs, muscle), dairy, vegetables, fruits, and grains.

Note: It is just as important, by the way, that variety is exercised in any diet, as issues such as food allergies can develop if the same diet is fed over the course of months and years.



Laura Garber, WoofGang, LLC

(646) 345-5116

Laura@myWoofGang.com

www.myWoofGang.com

Looking for some alternatives? If you're concerned about a choking hazard with raw bones (a rich calcium source), grind them up. Defrost only what you need for each meal for guaranteed freshness. If you worry about bacteria in raw meat, you can cook the food instead. For the ultimate in ease and convenience, there are commercial raw diets now available, such as *Nature's Variety* and *Home Made 4 Life*. And if you're not ready to embrace a completely homemade diet, add fresh foods to the commercial diet you're already feeding.

“Ancestral” Foods: Are All Proteins Created Equal?

From the very beginning, dogs evolved by picking through the human waste heap. As dog breeds became specialized to assist humans with their disparate jobs, the canine meal derived from human leftovers diverged just as greatly. While herding dogs were bred to work sheep, goats, and cattle, coastal breeds assisted fishermen, and hunting dogs helped with hunting various game. It stands to reason, then, that the working canine would feast on whatever was most available to his keeper. So, when deciding upon the optimal protein source for your dog, consider the job for which he was bred. Sight hounds will thrive on rabbit and venison, northern breeds on fish and sweet potato, herding dogs on beef and lamb, retrievers on duck, and Asian breeds on chicken and fish.

Red Flags when Assessing Your Dog's Diet

- 🐾 Fecal matter with a strong odor may indicate indigestible proteins in your dog's diet.
- 🐾 Carbohydrates are harder to digest than animal proteins, and high carb intake can manifest itself in flatulency or, worse, inflammation in the body.
- 🐾 Poor-quality foods with artificial colors and preservatives, hormones, and other chemicals can contribute to overall ill-health and create or increase allergic sensitivity.
- 🐾 Hyper, unfocused, out-of-control behavior may be due to an extremely high level of cereal foods such as wheat, corn or corn meal. As a test, soak the food in water for 15 minutes; if it swells in size and gets mushy, it's mostly cereal.
- 🐾 Dogs who are shy and stressed do not digest their food well and often suffer from intestinal complications such as diarrhea. Their coats are often extremely dry and shed heavily.
- 🐾 An EFA (Essential Fatty Acid) deficiency results in a dry, dull coat, hair loss, impaired wound healing, and the eventual development of skin lesions.

Tips on Protecting your Dog from Defective Foods

- 🐾 Store your dog's dry food in its original package so you have date/code information should you suspect the food at any time.
- 🐾 Don't feed your dog any food that looks or smells bad or abnormal.
- 🐾 Unless your dog is a fussy eater, be suspect of any food that your dog won't eat or becomes increasingly reluctant to eat.
- 🐾 Should your dog become ill with vomiting or diarrhea, his food might be the culprit. Consider switching to a different food made by a different company.
- 🐾 Contact your vet as well as the food manufacturer. By supplying date/code information, they can advise you whether other reports have been made about the same food.



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