

Nutritionists Offer Up Pet Food Talking Points for Vets

By Lou Anne Epperley, DVM

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When it comes to pet food, sometimes the patient is the best evidence of nutritional quality, experts say. Beyond the animal's response to the food, it's also a smart bet to go beyond the advertising and find out something about the company that makes it.

"The one thing pet owners need to recognize is that the pet food industry is a big business," said Lisa Weeth, DVM, clinical nutritionist for Red Bank Veterinary Hospital in Tinton Falls, N.J.

Dr. Weeth, a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Nutrition, said she looks at not only who makes the food, but how is the pet doing.

"Is it vomiting once a week? Is it drinking a lot and urinating a lot? Having chronic diarrhea and excess gas? I try to bring people back to how an animal is doing, and what's in the animal's best interest," Weeth said.

"I want them to leave the jingle and glossy ads at the door and really look at the patient," she added.

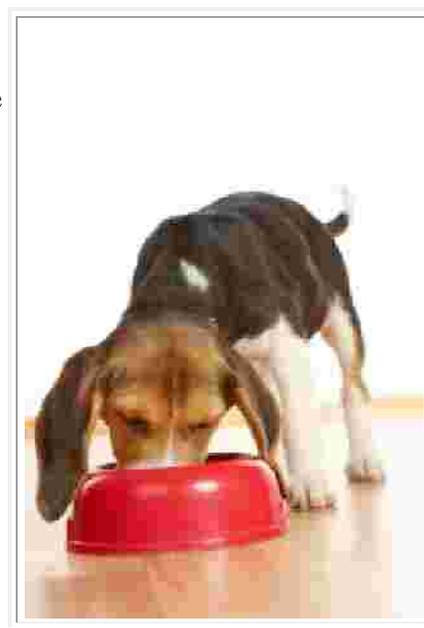
Commercial pet food diets are all processed and cooked in a similar fashion, comparing dry formulas to dry and canned formulas to canned, and every over-the-counter pet food is very comparable in nutrient digestibility, she said.

"The big differences are in the quality of ingredients used, and how well they control manufacturing quality," Weeth said. "Higher price does not always mean higher quality; it may simply mean more profit for the pet food company."

Diets from pet food marketing-distribution companies that don't make their own foods may potentially fluctuate more from batch to batch than a company where it's all done in-house, she said.

"The larger pet food manufacturing companies like Royal Canin, Hill's Pet Nutrition, Nestlé Purina and Iams PetCare will control all aspects of development, manufacturing and sales, so there is more company oversight of the pet food process," Weeth said. "These are also the companies that are investing in research that promotes veterinary medicine and veterinary nutrition. They are pushing the bounds of what we know about improving health and treating disease through diets."

In contrast, Weeth said, a pet food marketing company may outsource all of the food development and manufacturing to a third party, which makes the food and returns it to the company to sell.



Know the Companies

Weeth's philosophy is shared by Cailin Heinze, VMD, MS, an assistant professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University in North Grafton, Mass.

"Look at who makes it," said Dr. Heinze, also an ACVN diplomate.

Bigger companies have more quality control and generally make their own products, as opposed to contracting it out. Unfortunately, you have to get to a certain level of profit before you can have your own factory," she said. "Things like this can't be learned from a label."

When possible, Heinze recommends looking for diets that have been through AAFCO feeding trials, especially for puppies or kittens.

"And with marketing, if [a claim] sounds too good to be true, it probably is," she said. "Companies that dwell on all the things a competitor is doing wrong really rub me the wrong way. The ordinary consumer is not going to be able to look at a Web page and tell what is true. The claims are usually a mixture of truth and made-up 'facts.'

"If it says a grain-free diet will help a dog with allergies, that would be a company I would be suspicious of, as only a dog that has an allergy to a specific grain would improve on a [grain-free diet](#), and [grain allergies](#) are quite rare," Heinze continued.

Heinze believes pet food companies' staff should include a full-time nutritionist, either a Ph.D. or board-certified veterinary nutritionist.

"There is a big difference between companies that are changing their diets over time to reflect the latest scientific knowledge, compared with a company that paid someone five years ago for this recipe and still uses it, and the person who made it doesn't have a day-to-day role at the company," Heinze said.

Quality control of ingredients is another key factor, Heinze said.

"You want to purchase food from a company that tests every incoming raw ingredient, as well as the completed diet various times in the production process," she said. "Expiration dates should be based on product testing, and ingredients in finished products should be easily traced back to their source."

Quality control with therapeutic diets is "fantastic," stressed Rebecca Remillard, DVM, Dipl. AVCN, with the North Carolina State University Nutrition Service.

"You are using those to treat and diagnose conditions," Remillard said. "You pay \$2 to \$3 a pound for that food. What you see is no difference, but what you get is high quality assurance."

Comparing an over-the-counter limited-ingredient venison diet to Hill's d/d potato and venison formula, Remillard said the quality control of the therapeutic diet "had better be as good as your vaccines and as good as your antibiotics. And it is."

The problem with some commercial pet foods not related to therapeutic diets is that "They are allowed to change the formula within the vagaries of the ingredient list," she said. "The products are not

completely clean; for example, they could be contaminated with soybean from the previous product run.”

That being said, over-the-counter foods produced by the same companies making therapeutic diets may be more reliable on quality control because “it’s a carryover from the therapeutic formulas,” Remillard said.

“If pet owners can stay with large, popular brands that have a lot of turnover, and many, many dogs have been eating the food for years and years, they should be OK,” said Jennifer Larsen, DVM, Ph.D., Dipl. ACVN, of the nutrition support service at University of California, Davis, Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

“Some of the recent, smaller companies market via guilt, and they often do not have the expertise needed, nor do they invest in research and development,” Larsen continued.

“You shouldn’t make people feel guilty about buying a national brand of very popular food, because not only have a lot of those companies done a lot of research and development, but the food is also market-tested successfully on thousands and thousands of animals,” Larsen added.

Raw diets are very popular and have their advantages and disadvantages, she said. They are palatable, highly digestible, the owner can control the ingredients, and the high fat content supports a nice skin and coat, Larsen said.

Disadvantages are questionable nutritional adequacy and food safety.

“These can be reduced by the client working with a veterinary nutritionist to formulate the diet,” Larsen said. “We, the veterinarian and the client, want to be a team, to balance the risks and benefits, and engage in respectful discussions about pet nutrition. Veterinarians should be trying to avoid conflict with clients on food choices. We can still meet the same goal and provide a diet the animal will thrive on.”

Vet Nutritionists Weigh In On Pet Food Allergies, Grains

By Lou Anne Epperley, DVM

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Veterinary Practice News magazine interviewed four board-certified veterinary nutritionists on pet food allergies and the role grains play. They agreed on the following:

- Corn, wheat and soy are usually innocent when accused of causing food allergies.
- Clients, not veterinarians, often diagnose food allergies.
- There's a big difference between a true food allergy, which is rare, and a food intolerance.

Moreover, vilification of food grains as pet food ingredients may be myths started by small pet food companies as a way to compete with larger, established companies, according to four diplomates of the American College of Veterinary Nutrition.

"I honestly don't know where that got started. It's not based on any data, and there are excellent diets that contain one or more of those items," said Cailin Heinze, MS, VMD, and a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN).

"It may have been started by companies that wanted to distinguish themselves, to sell diets in a crowded marketplace," added Heinze, assistant professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. "To say that these ingredients are 'common causes of food allergies,' as I've seen reported, is not very accurate."

"You just have to follow the money trail," said Rebecca L. Remillard, DVM, Dipl. ACVN, of the North Carolina State University Nutrition Service. "If a company puts 'no soy' on the front of the bag, it invokes in people's basic brain stem the question, 'What's wrong with soy?'"

"Then, they go home and look at their dog food bag, and soy is one of the ingredients," Remillard continued. "So they change foods without any real knowledge or thought put into why they are changing. Marketing is powerful."

"Companies or salespeople often warn against corn, [wheat](#) or soy because of pet food marketing and propaganda, and then they develop a mythology about why all these might be harmful," said Jennifer Larsen, DVM, Ph.D., Dipl. ACVN.

"There is no science to back up many claims. Americans love conspiracy theories, but they aren't equally skeptical of all sources,"



added Larsen, of the nutrition support service at the Pritchard Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at the University of California, Davis.

“Corn is not an inherently good or bad food for dogs and cats, and there have been very few corn allergies in dogs and cats in this country,” said Lisa Weeth, DVM, Dipl. ACVN, a clinical nutritionist for Red Bank Veterinary Hospital in Tinton Falls, N.J. “But corn is used frequently as an ingredient in lower-cost pet foods, so in my opinion the boutique pet food companies are looking for ways to distinguish themselves from the bigger, more established competition.”

Food allergy is an abnormal immune response only to a protein, not to a fat or carbohydrate, Remillard said.

Larsen added that an animal is more likely to have an allergy to something it is repeatedly exposed to. Corn is 8 percent protein and 80 percent starch, and rice has less than 10 percent protein, Remillard said.

“But if an animal is allergic to protein, it’s like a bee sting; any amount will trigger a reaction. The problem for vets is, you can have a food intolerance case in front of you, and the vomiting and diarrhea look the same,” she said.

“True incidents of food allergy are about 10 percent of the animal population,” she continued. “Most ‘people’ cases of food allergic reaction are thought to be actually food intolerance.”

Weeth agreed, saying that a [food allergy](#) is an antigen-antibody reaction to a protein component in a diet.

“It could be the protein in beef and corn, just as well as the protein in venison and quinoa,” she said. “It depends on what the animal has been exposed to in the past, and what their immune system reacts to. A food intolerance doesn’t have an antigenic component, and can occur in dogs and cats with poor digestibility of an ingredient or combination of ingredients, or how the food is prepared.”

The Association of American Feed Control Officials is an advisory body that publishes guidelines for each state to adopt in full or in part their own feed control laws, Larsen said. The association doesn’t endorse or approve foods. Each year, AAFCO publishes a model bill and regulations, uniform interpretation and guidelines, and feed terms and ingredient definitions. Feed control laws are written by state legislatures and enforced by individual state feed control officials. If a number of animals get sick, then the federal Food and Drug Administration gets involved.

Depending on the extent to which a manufacturer adheres to AAFCO nutrition guidelines, there are specifically worded statements which may be printed on a pet food label:

- “Pet food” is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO (dog or cat) Food Nutrient Profiles for (maintenance; or growth; or gestation/lactation; or all life stages).
- Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that “Pet Food” provides complete and [balanced nutrition](#) for (life stage).
- This food is intended for intermittent and supplemental feeding only.

- “Pet Food” provides complete and balanced nutrition for (life stage) and is comparable in nutritional adequacy to a product (state which one) which has been substantiated using AAFCO feeding tests.

According to Heinze, the “intermittent and supplemental feeding” statement means the food item doesn’t meet profiles, hasn’t passed feeding trials, and should be considered a treat rather than a complete diet.

“There are numerous products on the market that look like complete and balanced diets, but then say this on the back in very small font,” she said.

To comply with the regulation, AAFCO requires that “a signed affidavit attesting that the product meets the requirements of (the bulleted statement printed on the package) shall be submitted upon request,” Heinze said.

“I think a lot of the public has no idea what an AAFCO statement is,” she said. “Some believe that AAFCO ‘approves’ foods, and that’s not the case at all.”

Some smaller and boutique pet food companies claim that AAFCO trials are “not enough,” yet instead of doing additional research on their own, do nothing and sell the product as “formulated to meet” AAFCO standards, Heinze continued.

“Some of the bigger companies are certainly doing a lot more trials than AAFCO requires,” she said.

AAFCO guidelines set forth ingredient definitions to be used, she said.

“I commonly see companies write illegal ingredient definitions on their websites and marketing materials to bash other competing companies,” Heinze said. They avoid putting illegal stuff on the label, because labeling laws tend to be enforced, whereas advertisements and marketing come under much less scrutiny.”

What's the Truth About Gluten?

By Lou Anne Epperley, DVM

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Before you remove the gluten from that pet's diet, you might be interested in hearing what a clinical veterinary nutritionist has to say.

“To me, food is a way of delivering calories and nutrients into the animal,” said Lisa Weeth, DVM, Dipl. ACVN, with Red Bank Veterinary Hospital in Tinton Falls, N.J.

“As long as the animal does not have a documented [food allergy](#), owners shouldn't worry about whether the food contains corn, wheat or rice—the ingredients themselves are not important—and more about the quality of food overall,” Dr. Weeth added.

Weeth said “gluten” is a term for the protein portion of the carbohydrate. True gluten enteropathies, or sensitivities to gliadin and glutenin, are extremely rare in dogs.

“Gluten-free or no-grain diets, which use primarily simple carbohydrates like tapioca or potato, may not have enough fiber compared to diets that include more complex carbohydrates like oats, barley and brown rice,” Weeth said. “What I see clinically in otherwise healthy dogs that are eating ‘gluten-free’ or ‘no-grain’ diets is poor stool quality and increased gassiness. This is often resolved with adding more complex carbohydrate to their diet.”



Cats are carnivores, dogs are omnivores, and their dietary requirements differ accordingly, she said.

“Healthy cats are more adapted to higher protein and fat diets that include less carbohydrate and fiber,” Weeth said. “You can feed a grain-free or low-carbohydrate canned diet to an otherwise healthy cat without ill effects, and often with improvement in certain health parameters, like weight and urinary health.”

To illustrate her point, Weeth invokes the image of farm cats eating well-fed rats and mice, which gives them about 66 percent water and 10 percent of calories as carbohydrates.

“I wouldn't recommend that people go back to the days of having their cats rely on prey only, but use this example to illustrate the point that the diets we typically feed may be very different than what nature intended,” she said. “A typical dry cat food, even one marketed as ‘grain-free,’ is still 10 percent water and 25 percent to 50 percent of the calories as carbohydrates.”

Dogs have evolved and adapted to human food patterns for a longer period of time, Weeth said.

“While the nutrient requirements are not identical between people and dogs, there are many similarities, and in my experience dogs do better when eating diets with a more even distribution of protein, fat and carbohydrate.”

INDUSTRY VOICES

“At Iams, we recognize the vital role veterinarians play with pet owners. The Iams Company was founded on nutritional research to help extend health in pets, and we remain committed to that heritage today. We’ll continue to partner with the veterinary community to identify innovative solutions from Iams Veterinary Formula diets that help veterinarians best address the needs of their patients.”

—Amy Dicke, DVM, Technical Service Veterinarian P&G Pet Care in Mason, Ohio

“Veterinarians have always been progressive in using nutrition to help treat certain diseases. We see that many pet owners are becoming more and more interested in using nutrition to help prevent future problems, and they are coming to their veterinarians for both information and recommendations.

“As a result, vets can have an impact on the health of cats and dogs not only through therapeutic diets for sick pets, but also with preventive nutrition for healthy pets.”

—Brent Mayabb, DVM, manager of education and development at Royal Canin in St. Charles, Mo.

“Consumer interest in finding the best food for their pets has greatly increased in recent years. The pet food industry will continue to respond to this trend by providing more information and great transparency.

“Hill’s company mission dedicates us to enhancing and lengthening the special relationships between people and their pets, and we do this by investing in extensive research to determine the precise balance of nutrients pets need to support optimal health and longevity. These nutrients can come from a variety of quality ingredients, but the balance of these nutrients—not too much and not too little—is the key to the clinically proven benefits that pet food can provide.

“Conducting feeding trials is the best way to determine our pets are getting the right balance of nutrients promised on the bag.”

—Janet Donlin, DVM, chief veterinary officer at Hill’s Pet Nutrition in Topeka, Kan.

“We’ve noticed a real evolution in how veterinarians view the role of nutrition in managing pet health. On one side of the exam table, the creation of new therapeutic diet categories has bolstered the veterinarian’s nutritional arsenal. On the other side, consumers know a lot more about nutrition than they used to, and that makes them more receptive to their veterinarian’s nutritional recommendations.

“Finally, compliance is vital to the success of any therapeutic intervention. Palatability and texture enhancements have made therapeutic diets more appealing to both the pet and owner.”

—Grace Long, DVM, MS, MBA, director of veterinary technical marketing at Nestlé Purina PetCare in St. Louis