

READING PET FOOD LABELS

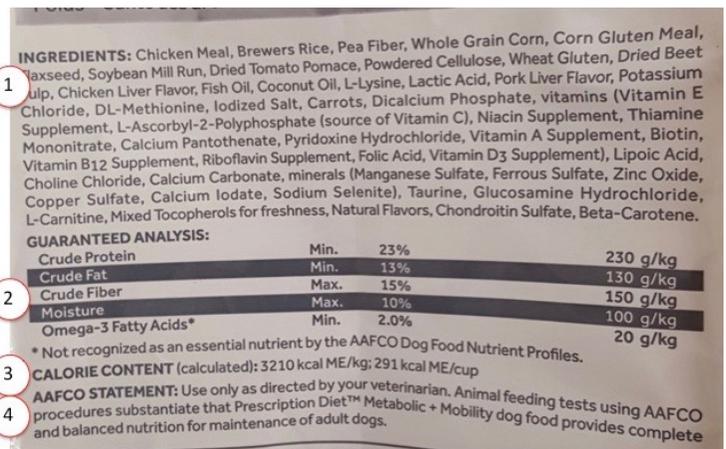
Choosing a food for your pet can be challenging. Visit a pet food store or watch a few commercials - there are dozens of companies all claiming that their food is superior. Buzzwords like “grain-free”, “natural”, and “holistic” abound, but do they really mean anything? Learning how to read a pet food label is the first step in choosing the best food for your companion.

What’s on a Label?

All pet food labels contain the same basic information:

- Ingredients (1)
- Nutrient Levels (“guaranteed analysis”) (2)
- Calorie Content (3)
- Nutritional adequacy statement by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) (4)

Quick Note: Nutrients are the components of food that your pet needs to survive (i.e. fat, protein, fiber, etc.). Ingredients are the way that those nutrients are provided (i.e. beef is an ingredient that provides protein and fat). There is an endless variety of ingredient combinations that can provide the specific nutrients your pet needs.



What is AAFCO?

AAFCO is an independent organization that sets nutritional standards for pet foods in the United States. All pet foods are legally required to provide an AAFCO statement, which verifies the testing method used to determine a pet food’s nutritional adequacy. There are 2 basic AAFCO categories:

1. Feeding Trial Method: This is the gold standard for pet food. This statement means that the manufacturer fed the food to a group of animals and documented their performance using an AAFCO-protocol feeding trial. *Example: “Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that BRAND X dog food provides complete and balanced nutrition for maintenance of adult dogs.”*

2. Formulation Method: This method is less expensive because the manufacturer does not have to perform a feeding trial. Instead, they only have to calculate the nutrient levels in the food. *Example: “BRAND X cat food is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by AAFCO Cat Food Profiles for maintenance of adult cats.”*

Your pet’s nutrient needs are determined by age, lifestyle, reproductive status, health, and breed.

Selecting a Food Type

Be cautious of foods that claim to be appropriate “for all life stages”. Those products are likely formulated to meet the requirements for the most demanding stages of life (i.e. growth). These foods often contain excessive amounts of protein or calcium that may actually be harmful to adult or senior animals. Nutritional deficiencies and nutritional excesses are both dangerous to your pet’s health. That is why it’s important to select a food that meets your pet’s age group, activity level, and specific needs.



NOTE: The calories your pet needs per day includes EVERYTHING your pet eats (treats, dry kibble, table scraps, etc.). If you feed a lot of treats you need to feed less food.

How much should I feed my pet?

We can calculate your pet’s caloric requirements based on their weight, age, and estimated metabolic rate. Just ask us!

Once you know how many calories your pet needs, you can calculate how much food you should feed. Each food should have a statement that lists its caloric density (See #3 on the pet food label picture, Page 1)

Calorie content is usually listed as “# kcal ME/cup”. “kcal ME” is the same as “calories”.
So... kcal ME/cup = calories/cup

cups of food needed per day = (calories your pet needs per day) ÷ (# kcal ME/cup)

A calculated caloric need is an estimate based on your pet’s age, lifestyle, reproductive status, and breed. If your pet is inappropriately gaining or losing weight while being fed a certain amount of food you may need to make some minor adjustments.

Feeding Recommendations For

Current Body Condition Score: _____

Current Weight: _____

Goal Weight: _____

Calories Needed Per Day: _____

kcal ME/cup (found on your bag of food): _____

Cups of Food Needed Per Day: _____

Understanding Label Buzzwords

Natural	This is a legally defined word. It requires a pet food to consist of only natural ingredients without chemical alterations (except for vitamins, minerals, and trace nutrients).
Organic	<p>“Organic” is legally defined by the USDA and the use of this term on products is strictly regulated. Organic pet foods must be produced following all the USDA organic regulations set forth for human food. For example, organic pet foods must be made without excluded methods (i.e. genetic engineering, ionizing radiation, inorganic pesticides, etc.) and their production must be overseen by a USDA National Organic Program-authorized certifying agent. Detailed information about regulations for organic products can be found online.</p> <p><i>NOTE: Natural and organic are NOT the same thing!</i></p>
Holistic	This word has no legal definition and is currently unregulated in the pet food industry. Since anyone can use this phrase on their label it has no real meaning.
Human Grade	This phrase is only allowed on a pet food label if the food was produced in a plant approved for making human food. Since not many pet food plants are approved, you won't see this on many labels. HOWEVER, this regulation doesn't apply to websites and advertisements, so you may see some pet foods claim to use “human grade” ingredients in their advertisements, regardless of whether or not they meet the requirements.
Grain-Free	<p>There is no AAFCO definition for “grain-free”, so it can mean different things to different manufacturers. Although a dry food can be grain-free, it has to have some kind of starch to bind it and make it into kibble pieces. Most grain-free foods use potato starch as their primary carbohydrate. Potato starch is no more healthy or digestible than wheat, corn, or soy for most dogs. Furthermore, gluten sensitivities are very rare in dogs. In fact, they've only been documented in Irish Setters. Since dogs are omnivorous they can easily digest and utilize the nutrients supplied by grains, and complex carbohydrates are actually required by dogs for normal stool formation.</p> <p><i>NOTE: This information does not necessarily apply to cats. Cats are obligate carnivores who do best on diets that are low in grains and starches.</i></p>

Sources

1. “Pet Food Labels Provide Limited Nutritional Information” <http://www.hillspet.com/en/us/pet-care/nutrition-feeding/pet-food-labels-provide-limited-nutritional-info>
2. “How To Read A Pet Food Label” <http://www.hillspet.com/en/us/pet-care/nutrition-feeding/reading-a-pet-food-label>
3. “Pet Food Facts — and Fiction”. Alice M. Jeromin, RPh, DVM, DACVD, Feb 19,2015. <http://veterinarynews.dvm360.com/pet-food-facts-and-fiction?pageID=1>