

# FINDING THE RIGHT PET FOOD

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## CHOOSING A PET FOOD COMPANY

Deciding what the best food is like trying to decide what the best model of car is. You narrow it down to the options you want and take it for a test ride. If you like the way it performs that's great, if not try something else. However, some basic rules-of-thumb should be considered. Just because a car is a great ride doesn't mean it's the safest or best vehicle on the road. Some "food for thought" to consider when choosing a pet food brand should include the following.

1. Does the company have a board-certified Diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (a veterinary nutritional specialist) working specifically for them?
2. The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) is the organization that guarantees that a pet food has met at least basic minimum standards. Does the food have an AAFCO guarantee of any kind? Is it a ration adequacy statement or is it a feeding trial statement (better)? An example of such a statement is, "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that this product provides complete and balanced nutrition for the growth and maintenance of cats, dogs, etc."
3. Is there a technical support department? Do they know everything about their products? Can you call and ask them what the particular level of an ingredient, vitamin, mineral, etc. is in a particular product, *and* can they tell you right then, on the spur of the moment—or will they have to get back to you? Do they know why the ingredient is important?
4. Does the company do feeding trial research? If they do, are the trials conducted within the company's facilities or are they conducted at another location? If they are conducted off-site, there is a greater chance for inadequate testing. Is the information from these studies readily accessible to the veterinary community? Have them prove it.
5. Does the company own their own production and testing facilities? Do they make their own product or do they "co-pack." If they make

their own product, is it made on-site or at another location? Companies that are self-sufficient have greater control over their production quality.

6. What is their quality control and monitoring? This may be hard information to obtain, but ask anyway—put them on the spot.

If *all* of these questions cannot be answered "yes," we strongly recommend that you choose another company. Failure to answer these questions with a "yes: does not necessarily mean a company's product is bad, but it does mean that it is a lot harder to know if it is good.

The following companies are often referred to by veterinary nutritional specialists as the "Big Four." They are *Purina*, *Hill's*, *Royal Canin* (no, this is not a misspelling and, yes, they also make food for cats, too), and *Iam's*. These companies can answer all yes to all of these questions and have the endorsement of most of these specialists. However, not all of the products from these companies are considered "premium." We recommend the following premium product lines from these companies for the best pet nutrition. *Purina Pro Plan*, *Hill's Science Diet*, *Royal Canin* name brand, and *Iam's Eukanuba*. *Purina Pro Plan* is the preferred brand for *Friendship Springs Veterinary Care*. Yes, they cost a little more, but in the long run they cost less because pets fed better food, like humans, tend to live longer, healthier, and happier.

Finally, remember that the use of phrases like "organic," "no by-product," "no corn," "no wheat," "all-natural," etc. is all just hype. All of the testimonials that you see on commercials and on the internet from pet owners, trainers, breeders, and even veterinarians means absolutely nothing unless these individuals have some provable nutritional training and expertise. It's all just marketing.

## PET FOOD DEFINITIONS, MYTHS, & FACTS

The *Ingredients List* and the *Guaranteed Analysis* list have a tremendous amount of useful information; however, it is only useful if you know what to do with that information. Understanding the difference between "dry matter" analysis versus "as fed" analysis is crucial (and complicated enough to be a topic for another day). Simply comparing the numbers on the guaranteed analysis of two different foods tells you absolutely nothing.

*By-product* does not necessarily mean the "scrapings off of the floor," such as heads, feet, and

feathers, which is what many sellers of "all-natural" and "organic" diets would have you believe. By-product is simply protein derived from organ meats. These are important sources of nutrients that cannot be found in diets containing only muscle sources of protein. Companies that do not use "animal by-product" add the missing nutrients by using other sources.

**Organic Food** does not mean that a product is necessarily a superior nutritional product or that the diet produced from such organic ingredients is necessarily well-balanced or an optimum diet. Organic products are those that are produced without the use of antibiotics, growth hormones, most conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering, or ionizing radiation. Before a product can be labeled "organic," a USDA-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to ensure that the farmer is following all the rules necessary to meet USDA standards. Companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to your local supermarket or restaurant must be certified as well.

**All-Natural** seems to defy ready definition. The most consistent definition seems to be a reference to foods that are prepared and stored without chemical preservatives added. Many pet foods today that have not traditionally been called "all-natural" meet this definition. Further, those pet foods that do have preservatives have not been shown to be inferior. There is no scientific evidence to support the claim that preservatives cause cancer. In fact, just the opposite may be true, as preservatives added to pet foods can help prevent the formation of cancer-causing compounds by preventing oxidation of fat and fat-soluble vitamins on exposure to air.

Feeding **Raw Diets** to pets has become a common practice over the last few years because of the belief that this is natural and it is what dogs and cats eat "in the wild." Proponents of these diets believe the dogs feel better and less disease, but there is no evidence to support these claims. A major concern with these diets is bacterial and parasite contamination in these foods. One study showed that a significant sampling of the diets contained *E. coli* as well as *Salmonella*. Consequently, owners feeding their pets these diets should be concerned about their own health.

Finally, here is some "food" for thought... Sure, eating raw food is what dogs and cats do in

the wild and its "natural." But how long do those animals live in the wild? Similarly, humans are not eating now they way we did a hundred years ago, and humans are living longer than they ever have now. With good care and good nutrition our domesticated pets are living longer, healthier, and happier than dogs and cats have ever lived before.

**Corn, Soy, & Wheat** are often called "**fillers**" and given a very negative connotation. What is filler? Usually it is a reference to some ingredient added to a diet to "bulk it up" but having no other nutritional value. However, ingredients like corn, soy, and wheat *do* have nutritional value. Just like in humans, they provide nutrients, including digestible and indigestible fiber, which are necessary for the maintenance of a healthy gastrointestinal tract. And, contrary to popular belief, they are not inherently any worse for pets than they are for humans. They are not more or less likely than any other food to be allergenic, cause gastrointestinal problems, etc. Adding proper proportions of these ingredients to pet foods serves to round out a well-balanced diet.