

Frequently Asked Questions & Myths






Last Update: January, 2018

General diet questions



What is the best food for my pet?

Your pet should be fed a complete and balanced diet (that provides all nutrients essential in the correct amounts and proportions) for its species and life stage from a reputable company. Other factors that can affect diet choice are size, sterilization (neutering) status, and health status. Your veterinarian is the best person to ask about the best diet for your pet, and in the following links you can find some guidance to choose a commercial brand of pet food to ensure the food is safe and nutritionally adequate.

-  [Recommendations on Selecting Pet Foods](#) (English)
-  [Recommandations pour le choix d'aliment pour animaux familiers](#) (Français)
-  [Recomendaciones para seleccionar el alimento para su mascota](#) (Español)
-  [Recomendações relativas à selecção de alimentos para animais de estimação](#) (Portu.)
-  [WSAVA全球营养委员会: 宠物食品选择建议](#)








How can I know if a commercial diet is adequate for my pet?

This depends on your geographical location, since pet food legislation varies between countries. In the United States, pet foods sold across states have labels that include an AAFCO (the Association of American Feed Control Officials) statement. This statement will let you know if the diet is complete and balanced for the specific species and lifestage or is only intended for intermittent feeding and it will also let you know how the nutritional adequacy was attained: via feeding trials or by following tables.

In Europe, there should be a statement where it says if the food is either complete (for the specific species and life-stage) or complementary (treats).

The manufacturing company should be further evaluated regarding their expertise, personnel, and quality control measures, as described here:

-  [Recommendations on Selecting Pet Foods](#) (English)
-  [Recommandations pour le choix d'aliment pour animaux familiers](#) (Français)
-  [Recomendaciones para seleccionar el alimento para su mascota](#) (Español)
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Is the ingredient list a good way to determine the quality of a pet food?

Overall, the ingredient name does not detail its nutritional quality, its digestibility, or the bioavailability of its nutrients. The most important thing is that the final product (formulated by experts) is tested to ensure that the nutritional requirements of your pet are met.



[In this link you can find an explanation of the meaning of different ingredient names in the USA](#)

The ingredient list may be useful to choose a pet food for dogs and cats with food allergies and intolerances but keep in mind that cross-contamination with foods and ingredients not reported on the label can occur during normal manufacturing processes.

? I heard that cereals are “fillers” and not good for my pet. Is this true?

Nothing in a pet food is truly “filler” and every ingredient in a pet food must have a nutritional purpose. Cereal grains are ingredients that mostly provide energy (in the form of starch), but they also provide essential nutrients like essential fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals.

Moreover, many cereals also provide fiber, which has beneficial effects on the intestinal tract among others.

Dogs and cats can digest cereal grains if they are properly cooked and as long as the overall diet is complete and balanced and there is no evidence to show they are harmful for our pets.

? What are by-products? Can they harm my pet?

A “by-product” is simply the term for an ingredient that is produced in parallel to another one. For example, wheat bran is a by-product of the production of flour for the baking industry. Since wheat bran is not the main ingredient goal of the process it is called the by-product, but this does not have any implication on its quality or nutritional value. Animal by-products, whether it is from a single species such as chicken or beef, or a combination of animals such as poultry (chicken, turkey, and duck) or meat (beef, pork, lamb, and goat) are the edible parts of the animal other than the muscle meat, which meat is the primary product of the food animal industry. This includes things like liver and kidney, which are extremely nutrient rich, but not commonly consumed in some human cultures. Items that are specifically excluded from being used as by-product in pet foods are inedible items, such as hooves and feathers.

A by-product is exactly like any other ingredient, in the sense that its name does not reflect its nutritional quality. Thus, they can be excellent ingredients for pet food and their use reduces the waste of nutrient rich food that is not consumed by people for a variety of reasons.

? Are home cooked diets adequate for my pet?

They can be, if they are complete and balanced. Home cooked diets, by definition, cannot be tested for adequacy (as opposed to commercial diets, which may undergo chemical nutrient analysis or feeding trials), thus, it is important that a veterinarian specialized in nutrition formulates the diet and that your pet is under careful veterinary supervision while a home-cooked diet is being fed. This involves twice yearly examinations and blood work testing, or even more often in the case of pets with certain chronic medical conditions. The benefit for a home-cooked diet is that it allows for the diet to be custom made to your dog or cat’s preferences, health status, and with ingredients that are easy to source for you.

? Can I safely use recipes for home cooked diets found in books and online?

Not really. Some diets that are available online or that are printed in books may have ingredients that are harmful to a dog or cats (such as garlic, which is a known toxic plant for many dogs and all cats) or have nutritional deficiencies that will make them harmful if fed long-term. Generic






recipes, besides not being customized to your dog or cat, can have several problems: be formulated by people who lack training or understanding of dog and cat nutritional needs, include outdated recommendations, be unbalanced and have serious nutritional deficiencies, and can be difficult to prepare. As long as there are no toxic ingredients, some generic recipes may be ok to feed as a single snack or treat, but should not replace the primary meals unless formulated by someone with training in veterinary nutrition.



Who should I contact if I want a home cooked diet for my pet?

You can ask your veterinarian help to find a veterinary nutritionist, or you can find them

 [here in the US](#) or

 [here in Europe](#)

You can also contact the veterinary school in your area.



Are raw diets beneficial for dogs and cats?

Advocates for raw meat feeding will claim that the benefits of raw diets are that it is a more “natural” or “evolutionary correct” dietary option, but this is not backed by science. Raw meats can be more digestible than commercial dry or canned pet foods, but so can home-cooked diets. Raw meat diet risks are well documented: risk of bacterial contamination; if bones are included there is a risk of oral or intestinal damage secondary to bone ingestion (obstruction, tooth fractures, and constipation); and nutritional deficiencies can occur if the diet is not formulated properly. If you wish to feed a less processed diet to your pet, [choose a commercial product made by a company that meets established quality control criteria](#) and ideally has undergone feeding tests. Even with commercially-prepared raw diets maintaining hygiene and properly disposing of your pet’s stool is very important. Even with proper food preparation and handling of stools, the risk of bacterial contamination and infection of both pets and humans in the household is a real risk. Households that include immunocompromised, elderly, and/or young children should not feed any raw meat products to their dogs or cats.



Are bones and raw meat beneficial for my pet’s dental health?

No. Dogs do like to chew, but aside from the risk of bacterial contamination on raw bones, hard bones can fracture teeth and if ingested whole or in shards can cause obstructions and perforations anywhere along the gastrointestinal tract. Additionally, while teeth may appear cleaner and have less tartar build-up when pets are fed bones or collagen chews, there is no difference in the presence of gum disease between dogs fed raw meat and bones and those fed more conventional dry and canned diets.



Is a high protein diet beneficial for my pet?

Almost all pet diets in the market provide protein levels well above the minimal requirements and any complete and balanced diet will provide enough protein to your pet. Providing very high protein diets to dogs and cats does not have any health benefits and it is not an environmentally sustainable strategy, since protein is a valuable and limited resource on the planet.



Are vegetarian diets adequate for pets?

Cats are obligate carnivores. Cats cannot thrive on vegetarian diets and these types of diets should not be fed to cats. Dogs can potentially receive all their required nutrients from a



vegetarian diet, but the company producing these diets should be carefully evaluated because these diets are harder to formulate and many vegetarian sourced nutrients are not as easily absorbed and metabolized by dogs as animal-sources ones. Please consult with your veterinarian if you are considering feeding a vegetarian diet to your dog.

? *Should I add vitamins or other supplements on top of a commercial diet?*

There is no need to add mineral/vitamin supplements on top of commercial pet foods. Commercial pet foods that are formulated to be complete and balanced already have the necessary vitamins and minerals in the correct amounts, and adding a supplement on top of that can be risky as some of these nutrients can be toxic if they are provided in high amounts. The one expectation may be with essential fatty acids. Longer coated breeds of dogs and cats may require slightly higher essential fatty acid intakes to maintain an optimal skin and hair coat quality. In these situations an essential fatty acid supplement, or changing to a different commercial diet, may be beneficial.

In general, though supplements need to be carefully evaluated regarding their efficacy and safety and you should always consult with your veterinarian if you are considering their use.

? *Is feeding canned better for my cat than feeding kibble?*

Cats are not good drinkers overall, and feeding canned will result in a less concentrated urine, thus can be helpful in cats with urinary disease. Canned food is also more satiating to some cats and this type of feeding may help treat and prevent obesity. However, many cats eat mainly dry foods and still live long and healthy lives.

? *How can I encourage water intake in my cat?*

You can feed canned diet (at least partially) and you can also use multiple water stations in different rooms of the house, or purchase a water fountain.

? *Can I feed treats?*

Dogs and cats can receive a controlled number of treats as long as it makes up no more than about 10% of the individual's calorie intake each day. There are commercial pet treats, but you can also use certain human foods. Fruits and vegetables are excellent, low calorie, options, as are things such as plain rice cakes or popcorn. It is important to avoid toxic ingredients for pets (such as onions, garlic, chocolate, macadamia nuts) including products containing xylitol, which is common in human products such as sugar free gum and some peanut butters but is toxic to pets. Additionally, the use of jerky and dried sweet potato treats has been associated with kidney disease in several parts of the world and is discouraged.



Feeding amount questions

? *How much should I feed my pet? Are label amount instructions accurate enough?*

Label instructions are a good starting point. These are based on expected daily calorie requirements for the "average" dog or cat at a certain weight. Alternatively, here you can find an



initial estimate of:

-  [the energy needs of adult dogs](#) (English)
-  [the energy needs of adult cats](#) (English)

Dividing the energy needs among the calorie density (e.g. calories per gram/can/cup) of the food chosen for your pet will also provide a good starting point.

But, these are only estimations and individual dogs or cats can vary up to 50% above or below these starting points. These amounts should be adjusted every 2 weeks initially to ensure your pet reaches and maintains an ideal body weight with an ideal body condition score (*see below*).



What is the ideal body weight of my pet?

The ideal body weight of your pet is the weight that keeps them at an ideal body condition. Body condition is scored on a 9-point scale with 4 to 5 out of 9 considered ideal with scores below 4 considered underweight and scores above 5 considered overweight. Visual charts can be downloaded from the links below.

-  **English**
[Body Condition Score - Dogs](#)
[Body Condition Score - Cats](#)
-  **Español**
[Puntuación de Condición Corporal - Perro](#)
[Puntuación de Condición Corporal - Gato](#)
-  **French**
[Indice de Condition Corporelle - Chien](#)
[Indice de Condition Corporelle - Chat](#)
-  **Portuguese**
[Classificação da Condição Corporal - Cão](#)
[Classificação da Condição Corporal - Gato](#)
-  体态评分表, 体态评分表
[Body Condition Score - Dogs](#)
[Body Condition Score - Cats](#)

Your veterinarian can teach you how to perform this on your pet, to ensure it is not too thin or overweight.



How many treats can I feed?

The treats should not exceed about 10% of the daily calorie allowance. The calorie content of commercial treats may be on the label or the website of the manufacturer, but you might need to call them if it is not listed. The calorie content of human foods [can be found here \(for the USA\)](#).

Feeding method questions

? *Is free feeding an adequate feeding method for my pets?*

Leaving food out or free feeding is only okay in pets that can maintain their ideal body weight and body condition by regulating their own food intake. It may also work well in sick or in-appetent pets and in lactating females and very young puppies.

In dogs and cats that are prone to becoming overweight or obese, free feeding should not be done. This method should also not be done in large breed growing puppies, which need to be fed in a portion controlled manner to ensure a slow rate of weight gain and a body condition score of 4 out of 9 to avoid joint and skeletal problems associated with a fast rate of growth.

? *I want to try a new food for my pet: how should I switch from the current diet?*

In healthy pets, switch by performing a slow transition over at least 3 days (longer in dogs and cats with disease). In dogs the foods can often be mixed together in the same bowl or feeding dish but in cats, it is important that the new food is offered in a completely separate bowl from the old food as many cats will refuse to eat diets that are mixed together. Sudden changes can result in vomiting and diarrhea and should be avoided.

	Current diet	New diet
Day 1	75%	25%
Day 2	50%	50%
Day 3	25%	75%
Day 4	0%	100%

? *Can a commercial food satisfy the feeding habits of my pet compared to homemade food?*

Dogs and cats have different feeding habits. Dogs are more voracious and tend to eat in one sitting and cats are grazers, eating small amounts of food during the day and night. Most domestic dogs and cats can be trained to eat meals without problems but it can be difficult in some cats.

In order to accommodate the small frequent meals schedule of cats, you can free feed (if the cat is not prone to obesity) or you can offer multiple feedings per day, or you can use food dispenser toys, automated feeders, or hide the food around. All of these strategies are much easier using commercial dry food, since home cooked diets cannot be left out of refrigeration for long.

? *My pet is always hungry, how should I feed him to help?*

Tips to feed hungry pets include: feeding multiple times a day, use of food dispenser toys, reduce boredom (by playing, walks, etc.), and using low energy density diets, such as “light” type diets. If you feed treats, choose low calorie ones such as melon, watermelon, apples, carrots, or commercial treats specifically marketed for that purpose.

? *My pet is not feeling well and not eating. How can I ensure they receive adequate nutrition?*

Pets that are not eating at all or are not eating enough to maintain their body weight need to be



assessed by your veterinarian as soon as possible. Your veterinarian will be able to assess and treat the cause of this problem. There are methods to provide nutritional support to in-appetent pets both in the veterinary hospital and at home while they are being diagnosed and treated, [which are described here](#). Force feeding should be avoided since it can result in food aversion, aspiration pneumonia, and other issues.

Food safety questions



What steps are taken to ensure pet food is safe for my pet?

Food legislation varies among countries. In the United States, state laws, the USDA, and [the FDA](#) all have roles to ensure the ingredients used for pet food and the final product are safe to feed to our pets. In Europe, the [European Union legislation](#) is harmonized between EU countries.

Besides what is required by law, pet food companies can perform additional safety tests to ensure their diets are nutritious and safe of contaminants.



I empty the food from the bag into a container once I buy it: is this practice safe?

It is better to keep the diet in the original package, especially if this package has been specifically designed to keep the product fresh. Using a separate container can reduce shelf life of the product and it can promote infestations if the container is not thoroughly cleaned on a regular basis. Additionally, keeping the original packaging allow for better tracing of food in the event of any issues or concerns about the food.



How long does canned food last after opening?

Once you open a can of pet food any uneaten food must be kept in refrigeration and fed within 48-72 hours. Please read the label of the can for more specific storage information.



Are genetically modified (GMO) ingredients present in my pet food? How can I know? Is this bad for my pet?

It is very possible that GMO ingredients are present in pet food. Depending on the country legislation, these may or may not be declared on the label. The best way to know is to call the company and ask them about it. That said, at this time, GMO ingredients have been fed to food animals for over 20 years without any safety or health issues and there have been no demonstrated negative health effects to feeding GMO ingredients to dog or cats.

