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Based on [Interpreting Pet Food Labels](#), by Dr. Dzanis, DVM, USDA

CHOOSING A PET FOOD

Introduction

- The best source to consult when choosing a pet food (other than your veterinarian) is the label on the bag.
- Pet food labeling is regulated at two levels –
 - Federal regulations, under the FDA Center for Vet Medicine (CVM), establish the standards by which all animal feeds are regulated.
 - State regulations may also exist for pet food labels. Most resemble guidelines established by the AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials)



Animal Label Standards

- According to the FDA CVM, all animal feed must include the following on their labels –
 - ▣ proper identification of product
 - ▣ net quantity statement (at minimum, how much product is in the container)
 - ▣ manufacturer's address
 - ▣ proper listing of ingredients



Product Name

- The product name is the first part of the label that is visible to consumers.
- Because of this, manufactures may choose to use a fanciful or sometimes misleading name to emphasize their product and increase sales.
- Some manufacturers may choose to emphasize a particular ingredient.
 - ▣ How an ingredient may be used in a title is closely regulated by AAFCO rules.



AAFCO Rules

- How terms are used on a package of animal food is closely regulated. Regulations include...
 - ▣ 95% Rule: this rule applies to products consisting primarily of meat, poultry, or fish.
 - ▣ In these cases, 95% or more of the product must contain the ingredient if it is used in the title.
 - ▣ For example, if a bag is labeled “Beef for Dogs”, it must be 95% or more beef.
 - ▣ If a can says “Tuna for Cats”, it must be 95% or more tuna.
- This ingredient must be first on the ingredient list.



AAFCO Rules

- The 25% Rule (or “Dinner” rule) applies to many canned or dry products.
 - ▣ In the 25% Rule, if an ingredient is followed or preceded by a descriptive term, that ingredient must comprise at least 25% of the product.
 - ▣ For example, if a product is labeled “Chicken Nuggets for Cats”, it must be 25% or more chicken.
 - ▣ “Beef Dinner for Dogs” must be 25%+ beef.



AAFCO Rules

□ 25% Rule (cont)

- Because it can be as low as 25%, this particular ingredient may not be first on the ingredient list
- For example a product may be 25% beef, 50% corn, and 25% other. In this case, beef would be second on the ingredient list after corn.
- The ingredient list should always be checked to ensure that more prevalent ingredients are as desirable.
- E.g. if your cat does not like fish, but also does not like the “Chicken Cat Formula”, it may actually have more fish than chicken! Check the ingredient label.



AAFCO Rules

□ 25% Rule (cont)

- If more than one ingredient is included in a dinner name, they must total 25% and be listed in the same order as found on the ingredient list.
- Furthermore each named ingredient cannot be less than 3% of the total product.
- For example, “Chicken n’ Fish Dinner for Cats” must have at least 3% chicken, 3% fish, and together fish and chicken must total at least 25%. Furthermore, fish cannot exceed the percentage of chicken.



AAFCO Rules

- 25% Rule (cont)
 - Keep in mind that this rule can be used to the advantage of the manufacturer to cut costs.
 - If a product is called “Lamb and Beef Dinner for Dogs”, lamb must comprise only 13% of the product rather than 25% of the product.
 - Lamb must be greater than Beef; Beef can be as low as 3%
 - So, to reiterate...
 - Lamb and Beef Dinner for Dogs – lamb must be 3% or more
 - Lamb Dinner for Dogs – lamb must be 25% or more
 - Lamb for Dogs – lamb must be 95% or higher



AAFCO Rules

- 3% Rule was created to allow manufacturers to point out the presence of minor ingredients that do not equate to enough to qualify for the “dinner” rule.
 - ▣ E.g. “Cheese Dinner for Dogs” would require the product to be made from 25% cheese or more
 - ▣ That’s a lot of cheese!
- To enable this to be advertised without requiring 25% of a product, the 3% Rule was instated.



AAFCO Rules

- 3% Rule (cont)
 - ▣ If an ingredient is preceded by “with”, that ingredient must comprise 3% or more of a product.
 - ▣ For example...
 - Beef for Dogs: Beef must be 95% or more of the product
 - Beef Dinner for Dogs: Beef must be 25% or more
 - Dog Food With Beef: Beef must be 3% or more

- Small changes in wording make a huge difference!
 - ▣ E.g. “Tuna Cat Food” and “Cat Food With Tuna” could have a 92% difference in Tuna content!



AAFCO Rules

- Under the Flavor Rule, a specific percentage of an ingredient is not required, but that ingredient must be detectable.
 - ▣ For example, “Chicken Cat Food with Bacon Flavor” would require 95% chicken, but only ‘detectable’ flavors of bacon.
 - ▣ Flavor must be present in the same size, font, and color as the rest of the title.
- Rarely are artificial flavors found in dog foods; the exceptions are smoke or bacon.



AAFCO Rules - Overview

- 95% Rule – if an ingredient is present in the title with no descriptive terms or modifier, it must comprise at least 95% of the product
 - ▣ E.g. Beef Dog Food must be 95%+ beef
- 25% Rule (Dinner Rule) – if an ingredient is in the title but has a descriptive term, it must comprise at least 25% of the product
 - ▣ E.g. Beef Dinner Dog Food must be 25%+ beef
- 3% Rule (With Rule) – if an ingredient is in the title but preceded by “with”, it must be present in at least 3% of the product
 - ▣ E.g. Dog Food With Beef must be 3%+ beef.
- Flavor Rule – if a title’s ingredient is followed by “flavor”, it must be detectable in the product.
 - ▣ E.g. Dog Food with Beef Flavor has no minimum percentage of beef.



Net Quantity Statement

- The Net Quantity Statement tells you how much product is in the container.
 - ▣ E.g. “Net Quantity: 50 lbs.”
- This is important to check
 - ▣ Two similar sized bags may vary greatly by weight if one of the products is “puffed” with air
 - ▣ It is difficult to determine how much empty space exists in a package that is not clear.
 - ▣ The NQS is legally enforced; it cannot be inaccurate.



Manufacturers Name & Address

- This identifies the company responsible for the quality of the food.
- The name on the label is the responsible group.
 - ▣ If the label says "manufactured for..." or "distributed by...", the food was manufactured by a separate company. They are not responsible for the quality of the product.
 - ▣ The name on the label still designates the responsible party.
- By law, a company should be listed in either a city directory or a telephone directory.
 - ▣ Not all labels include a street address along with the city, State, and zip code.
- Many manufacturers also include a toll-free number on the label for consumer inquiries.
 - ▣ If a consumer has a question or complaint about the product, he or she should not hesitate to use this information to contact the responsible party.



Ingredient List

- All ingredients must be listed by order of weight
 - ▣ Heaviest, or most prevalent ingredients, must be listed first
 - ▣ Weights of ingredients include their water weight.
 - ▣ This can be important to note as some ingredients, particularly meat, are mostly water (animal tissue is 70% water).
 - ▣ A meat byproduct may have more protein than pure meat for this reason.



Water Weight and Pet Food Quality

- For example, Pet Food I may list meat as its first ingredient and corn as its second.
- Pet Food II may have corn as its first ingredient and “meat meal” as its second.
- Food I may claim because it has meat as its first ingredient that it has more protein.
 - However, because meat is up to 75% water, while meat meal is only 10% water, this may not be true.
 - Remove the water from the meat, and it becomes a much smaller percentage of the ingredient list.



Definitions of Meat

- Meat: defined as the "clean flesh of slaughtered mammals and is limited to...the striate muscle...with or without the accompanying and overlying fat and the portions of the skin, sinew, nerve and blood vessels which normally accompany the flesh."
- Meat Meal: "the rendered product from mammal tissues, exclusive of any added blood, hair, horn, hide trimmings, manure, stomach and rumen contents."



Meat vs. Meat Meal

- Meat meal may not sound all that appetizing
- However, it is probably more nutritious.
 - ▣ Animals do not care if what they are getting is an animal's striated muscle or intestines.
 - ▣ With proportionally more protein, meat meal can be a better option.
- NOTE: lamb meal, as a primary ingredient, would not work as “Lamb Dinner”. Only lamb would.
 - ▣ Only a product with meat (and not meat meal) would work for the 95% and 25% rules.



Guaranteed Analysis

- A pet food label must state guarantees for minimum percentages of protein and fat
- A pet food label must also guarantee maximum levels for fiber and moisture are not surpassed.
- These are valuable for comparing different brands.
 - ▣ In the previous example, it would be easy to compare whether the dog food with meat or the one with meat meal is better in part by looking at the minimum percentage protein for each brand.



Nutritional Adequacy Statement

- If a product claimed it was “complete” or “100% nutritious” and wasn’t, it could seriously harm a pet.
 - ▣ For this reason, the AAFCO Nutritional Adequacy Statement is among the most important considerations.
 - ▣ A “Complete and Balanced” food must be tested to prove if a brand is adequate for all dietary needs of the pet.
- There are two ways to test for “Complete & Balanced”
 - ▣ 1. Feeding Trials, w/ analysis of pet responses to the food.
 - ▣ 2. Whether ingredients meet or surpass minimum standards established by the AAFCO for nutrients in a pet food.
 - ▣ Either can be used to test for this claim.



Nutritional Adequacy Statement

- Besides stating if a food is “complete and balanced” (i.e. by itself, this food is enough for a pet), it will also state the stage of life for which this food is intended.
 - ▣ A product intended “For All Life Stages” must meet the most stringent requirements.
 - ▣ A “Maintenance Ration” will be adequate for adult, non-reproducing dogs or cats (but not other categories).
 - ▣ “Senior” or “Puppy” foods should be used only for that age category.
 - ▣ “Intended for Intermittent Feeding” means it is not suitable as a primary food for your animal (but ok as a treat).



Feeding Directions

- Feeding directions tell the consumer how much product should be fed to the animal.
- At minimum, they should include something like "feed ___ cups per ___ pounds of body weight daily."
 - ▣ These are simply general suggestions; breed, size, and other factors can affect and change this.
 - ▣ Offer the suggested amount first and then change as needed.
 - ▣ A nursing mother should be provided as much as she eats



Other Label Claims

- Some foods are labeled as “premium”, “gourmet”, or “choice”. These mean nothing.
 - ▣ Anything could be labeled as “gourmet”
- “Natural” is sometimes found on labels; this too means absolutely nothing.

- Organic DOES mean something specific. Organic refers to the method in which the ingredients were produced.
 - ▣ As of 2010, there are no regulations for the organic term in pet foods; there are strict regulations for “organic” in human food.



Dog Foods – Guidelines for Selection

- Make sure that the label in commercially manufactured foods has the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) guarantee.
- Be certain that the food has an expiration date
- Look for meat (beef, chicken, lamb or turkey) as the first ingredient.
- Look for rice as the main grain in the formula, and mixed tocopherols (vitamin E) as preservatives.



Dog Foods – Guidelines for Selection

- Try to avoid BHA/BHT preservatives (they may increase the risk of some cancers).
- Store food in a sealed container in a cool, dry place.
- Consider feeding homemade diets for dogs with special dietary needs.
- Feed the dog according to correct body weight and condition, and consider factors such as growth, adult maintenance, level of activity, gestation, lactation, and age.



Dog Foods – Guidelines for Selection

- When changing foods, mix 1/4 of the new food to 3/4 of the old food, and increase gradually to prevent gastric upsets.
 - ▣ Watch the dog's stool, weight, and coat while changing foods.
- Feed adult dogs twice a day to prevent gorging on a single meal and to reduce the occurrence of gastric upsets.
- Allow approximately 20 minutes per feeding for the dog to clean the bowl.
- Make sure that the dog has fresh and clean water at all times.

▪ Source: *Canine Feeding & Nutrition, Alabama Cooperative Extension System*

