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WSAVA Global Nutrition Committee: Guidelines on Selecting Pet Foods



Pet food labels include a lot of required and useful information for veterinary teams and pet owners. They may also include marketing images and phrases that are designed to promote product sales rather than relay nutritional information. This means that some of the information, including unregulated terms such as 'holistic' or 'premium', is of little practical value for nutritional assessment. The veterinary team has a vital role in helping pet owners make informed decisions on the optimal diet for their dog or cat.

What to look for in a brand

1. Do they employ a Nutritionist?

- Appropriate qualifications are either a PhD in Animal Nutrition or Board Certification by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN) or the European College of Veterinary Comparative Nutrition (ECVCN).
- What are the Nutritionist's name, qualifications and employment status? Consultants may have limited influence compared to a staff Nutritionist.

2. Who formulates the diet?

- Is the recipe developed by an experienced pet food formulator (MS or PhD in Animal Nutrition), a veterinarian, or a pet owner/breeder/trainer?
- Recipe development is a complex process requiring knowledge of nutrition, raw materials, and processing not taught in veterinary school programs.
- Trained and experienced formulators may have a degree (MS/PhD) in food science and technology to help guide ingredient selection and nutrient levels for health or disease management.
- An individual with Board Certification by ACVN or ECVCN may also be cross-trained in pet food formulation or work in collaboration with experienced pet food formulators to help guide ingredient selection and nutrient levels.

3. What is the quality control process for ingredients and finished products?

- Diets formulated to meet Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) or European Pet Food Industry Federation (FEDIAF) guidelines should meet their nutrient profiles. Does the diet meet the profile based on analysis using a nutrient database or on chemical analysis of the finished product?
- Manufacturers and pet food providers should have adequate quality control to ensure companion animal and owner safety. This should include ingredient (food and supplement) validation, final diet nutrient analysis, toxicology, bacteriology, and packaging/shelf-life screenings prior to, during, and after manufacturing.

4. What kind of product research or nutrition studies have been conducted? Is it published in peer-reviewed journals?

- Pet food companies are not required to conduct or sponsor nutritional research in order to produce and sell a food, but when they do, it indicates a commitment to animal health and wellness.

What to look for on a label

1. Nutrition Adequacy Statement?

- Is it a complete diet? Foods should be labeled to indicate if they provide a "complete" diet with all required nutrients. The label might also specify if this was determined via life stage feeding trials vs formulation to meet requirements. Those labeled as intended for "short-term", "intermittent", or "complementary" feeding should only be fed as a small portion of the diet (10% or less), or under veterinarian supervision if feeding a therapeutic diet.
- Does the food match the nutritional needs of the individual dog or cat? AAFCO and FEDIAF provide pet food manufacturers with recommended nutrient levels for different life-stages (reproduction, growth, and adult) for healthy dogs or cats. Diets labeled "for all life-stages" are formulated for reproduction and growth.

2. How many calories per gram or serving of food?

- Obesity prevalence is increasing in pets in many areas of the world. Having access to accurate pet food caloric content can help prevent unintended overfeeding. Calorie information is only required on pet food labels in the US. Where it is not provided on the label it should be available by contacting the manufacturer or calculating from label nutrient analysis.

3. Does the company provide immediate contact information such as a phone number or email address?

- Company representatives should be easily accessible for additional questions, such as the level of specific nutrients not on the label. Pet food companies should be able to provide an "average" or "typical" analysis for all essential nutrients in their food.

4. Who makes the food?

- Companies may make their own food (i.e., "Made by") or use a third-party manufacturer (i.e., "Made for" or "Distributed by").

If the manufacturer cannot or will not provide any of this information, veterinarians and owners should be cautious about feeding that brand.