

By Kerry Dimmer

Dinner is served!

How much do you know about the food you are feeding your cat and dog? Kerry Dimmer discovers that if you take the time to understand the information printed on pet food labels it will help you make informed decisions that will affect the health and longevity of your pet.



Some might say we aren't doing our pets any favours by giving them processed food, but the alternative is just too extreme. Leaving our pets to hunt in suburban environments would not draw them to us affectionately. Nor would it give them the safety and the comforts that we prevail upon them so lavishly.

Yes, it is true that humans are responsible for changing some of the basic instincts of our pets. Dogs and cats left in the wild would be hunting rats, mice, lizards, rabbits and other small creatures from which they would derive all the essential

nutrients required to remain healthy.

Dogs and cats are carnivores and two very important factors determine this. Firstly, their digestive system is ideal for breaking down animal tissue and coping with bacteria that may be present in, for instance, rancid meat. Secondly, the mouth and jaw are structured to move up and down, with a slight side-to-side movement, but are unable to move front to back like an omnivore (human) can. This is especially useful for slicing through animal tissue like a pair of scissors. Teeth too, are structured to grab, rip, tear, shred, shear and crunch meat.

But given that we are not going to go and buy huge quantities of fresh or live produce for our pets to consume, we are faced with no alternative but to turn to what is readily and easily available, and no, that is not what is on your dinner plate!

You should not feed your dog or cat human food because they simply do not have the enzymes or friendly bacteria that is required to break down the starch and carbohydrates found in an omnivore's diet. That isn't to say, however, that pets won't enjoy pizza, hamburgers, or even the odd piece of onion or cucumber.



The easiest, most cost-effective, and popular method of feeding felines and canines is to simply purchase commercially prepared food from your local pet shop, supermarket, or veterinary clinic. If you're lucky enough to have a vet like Dr Matt, of the Desert Vet Clinic, you'll be given more than enough advice as to the choice of food that's best for your individual pet.

"Firstly you need to understand the difference between what's sold in a supermarket versus that from a clinic," he says. "Dogs, as an example, will pretty much eat what's put in front of them, and generally speaking, there's nothing

wrong with the food sold in supermarkets. However, brands like Eukanuba and Royal Canin are only available from veterinary clinics for a reason, and that's because they are considered therapeutic or treatment foods."

Therapeutic foods contain ingredients that you will not find in foods obtained from supermarkets. When an animal has, for example, digestive, renal, heart or urinary problems, certain foods may act as an irritant and can easily exacerbate the condition. On the other hand, therapeutic foods offer a wide variety of advantages that cater specifically for age, breed and medical conditions. Unlike some of the generic commercial food, they also contain little to no fillers, which are used by pet food manufacturers to bulk out the product and help decrease costs, and of course aid in 'filling' the animal up.

The disadvantage of therapy food is that you pay a premium, which is why the tinned and packaged food from a supermarket is so popular. But are they safe? Dr Matt says that it would be financial suicide for any pet food manufacturer to include toxic ingredients in their products. "A good comparison is to think of the way we buy human medicine. There's an original brand, and then there's a generic cheaper alternative. The basic chemical compound is the same but the effect on the patient can be completely different, as well as the technology used to develop it.

"Laboratory requirements are met in both cases, but there may be factors in the cheaper brand that the laboratory doesn't require the manufacturer to reveal or to advertise on the label."

Mars AIME is the distributor in the UAE for Pedigree, Chappie, Whiskas, Sheba, and Kitekat as well as Thomas Cat Littler and Trill bird food. Its Director of Scientific Affairs, Ahshraf Shehata, agrees that some of the information on the packaging is a legal requirement. "This needs to be there so that product quality and chemical attributes can be monitored by the government." He assures us that Mars applies the same quality and food safety standards for pet food as are applied to human food.

"We take the quality of our products very seriously with numerous resources dedicated to ensure our products are in top condition at the time of consumption. This includes the selection of high quality

raw materials, recipes that provide good nutrition, and stringent quality control of our manufacturing and distribution," he says.

"But what is more important for the consumer is the information about the weight, size, age of cat/dog because each pet has different calorie and nutritional requirements, so all Mars products are prepared with that in mind," says Shehata. "Pets require a balanced diet with the correct levels of vitamins, minerals, proteins, fats etc."

Which brings us to what actually goes into the food. On the front of a typical bag or can, you will find the product name, weight and purpose (ie: if it is dog/cat food, a snack/treat). On the reverse, there should be a number of information panels that you can use to make an informed decision.

Guaranteed Analysis

Perhaps the most misunderstood portion of a label is the Guaranteed Analysis section that provides the nutrient composition of the contents. Minimum percentages of crude protein and crude fat, as well as maximum percentages of crude fibre and moisture will be indicated. 'Crude', by the way, indicates that the method used to determine the nutrient concentrations provide a rough estimate of quantity but not quality of the nutrients.

Ingredients

As with human food, the ingredients must be listed in descending order according to weight. Because products like beef or chicken are high in moisture, it is important to analyze the top ingredients together rather than putting more priority on the first on the list. When it comes to protein content, you'll need to know the difference between whole meat or meat meal.

Whole meat is exactly that, only meat. *Meat meals* contain ground or dehydrated meat and meat by-products, a word that usually sets off alarm bells.

While the thought may not excite you, animal by-products usually include items like the internal organs, heads, feet (chicken), and intestines. But this is not a bad thing, according to Dr Matt. "When an animal in the wild catches live food, it will eat almost the entire animal, and is most likely to start with the intestines where the most nutrients are to be found. He wants the skin, ligaments, connective tissue, kidneys and so on. He knows it's good for him."

Feeding Guidelines

As indicated by Shehata, it is critical that feeding guidelines be followed. A consequence of overfeeding translates into an overweight animal that has consumed too many calories and is not exercising accordingly. Bear in mind however that the label guidelines are just that ... guidelines or estimates, recommended for an average animal.



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Another important aspect to consider is the digestibility of the product, which is the amount of nutrients in the food that the animal is able to break down and absorb. A rule of thumb that can be applied is: the less digestible the diet, the more an animal needs to be fed in order to ensure absorption of the ideal amount of nutrients. If you compare digestibility with price you may find that buying a more expensive food might be a more economical option.

Expiry date

The expiry date is most often one year after manufacture. It indicates when the food was processed, but does not account for the time that ingredients were stored prior to production. That said, the expiry date is there to show that the contents are nutritionally valid up to the date indicated, so the earlier the consumption the fresher the contents.

Soft versus Dry

The basic difference between canned (soft) food versus the dry variety is the water content. Soft food contains up to 80% water, and dry food up to 90% dry matter. Dry food has a number of advantages in that it is generally a little cheaper than soft food; it offers beneficial massage of the teeth and gums; and it does not need to be refrigerated, although storage life is less than that of tinned foods.

But, as Dr Matt points out, “Animals like soft food, because it’s tastier. So if you’re serving dry food add a little warm water, let it stand before mashing it up, and slightly reheat (10 sec) in a microwave, it will be much more appealing to the pet.”

No matter what diet you decide is the best for your pet, remember this nugget from Dr Matt: “Too much of one type of food all the time can lead to a deficiency somewhere. Mix it up a little, grind egg shells into a powder, add fish oil, the fat discards from trimming your meat, even the odd carrot can provide nutritional benefits your pet may not be getting.”

The point he’s making is obvious but let’s quote him again for emphasis: “You don’t see a tiger eating spaghetti, it’s just not its natural food.”

Reader Interview...

Owner: Pete Breslin, Jumeriah

Pets: Sam – Desert/German Shepherd dog

Julie – Maltese dog

Are you concerned about the ingredients in commercially produced pet food?

“Yes, but I doubt they contain poison, besides there are controls and regulations to ensure this.”

Does the term by-product worry you at all?

“Offal and other animal by-products would be consumed by animals in the wild and can be rich in vitamins. It may not sound very pretty to us but pet food is not for human consumption.”

What do you feed Sam and Julie?

“I’ve had great success with tinned Pedigree but it’s not their staple diet. I augment that with meat and chicken on the bone and there’s always a bowl of dried food available but more often than not I end up throwing it away uneaten.”



What's In A Name?

Does the name define the pet or does the pet defy the name? Kerry Dimmer takes a tongue-in-cheek look at one of the most important decisions pet owners make, and the consequences of living with it.

When it comes to naming pets, my Mom is quite the creative expert. For instance, when she babysat my daughter's Australian Spiny Stick Insect, she named it *Bugsy Alone*. Then there was the duck that wandered onto their property that attempted to mate with every feathered encounter ... he was promptly called *Roger*. There was also *Bullit*, the Alsatian, so-called for his speed at chasing balls. And it wasn't by chance either that he looked a little like Steve McQueen, the star of the movie by the same name.

I'm afraid my Gran wasn't as ingenuous. When Bonnie, her beloved and precocious Yorkshire Terrier died, she was replaced with yet another Yorkie, and the newbie was named, very originally, Bonnie! Bonnie II was replaced with Bonnie III and so on. Perhaps my Gran was afraid that Alzheimer's would set in at some point, thus the immortalisation of the 'Bonnie's', a name she would never forget.

According to a USA poll based on pet tags issued, the most popular name for a male dog is Max, and his cohort would be Maggie or Molly. Tigger is the most popular feline choice, probably because their owners can't spell Tiger, which coincidentally happens to be second favourite. What is really bizarre is the third most popular cat name is, wait for it ... Max!

So what is it about the name Max? Could it be that egotistical owners enjoy the definition: *son of the wise leader*, something that certainly doesn't apply to Donna Gardner from Macungie, America. She forgot her Labrador in the car for over an hour while shopping. Several times, she heard a car horn parping from the car park before she finally investigated, only to find clever Max sitting in the driver's seat honking

the horn for attention. The new definition for her Max has to be 'son of the negligent leader'.

There is, can you believe, a 'Wacky Pet Name' list. This year *Pickle Von Corndog* tops the dog list, and *Purr Diem* the cat list. And what is this obsession with butts? There's a Chunky Butt, Stinky Butt, Dusty Butt, Cheeky Butt, Fuzzy Butt, even a Bubble Butt. Imagine losing your pet and asking your neighbours if they've seen your Chunky or Fuzzy Butt? Err I hear police sirens approaching.

Experts advise that when choosing a name for your pet its best to use one- or two-syllable words, but be careful because at some point you are going to have to call your pet. Shouting out for Sam or Bella is going to be a lot less embarrassing in the park than Death Breath or Fatso, regardless that the poor

creature might actually epitomise its name.

What you need to bear in mind is that the name you choose actually says more about you than it does your pet. It will reflect your sense of humour, your interests or even how you want to be perceived by others. Think about puny people with a dog called *Butch*; or an alcoholic with a cat called *Whisky*; a Chihuahua called *Flea*; or a fish called *Girlfriend* ... ah, now that's really sad!

I wouldn't be surprised if our pets have names for us too. If that's the case, they are probably having a whole lot of fun calling us Stupid, Smelly, or Poop-scooper. So before you actually cast your pet's name in stone, just remember that revenge is sweet, especially if it's given with a lick.

