How to Properly Read Pet Food Labels

Section Summaries

Introduction
✦ Making good nutritional recommendations for pets is important
✦ Veterinary organizations agree on the importance of pet nutrition
✦ Diet is the “5th vital assessment”
✦ There are regulations that define what the wording on pet food labels mean

FDA

The FDA:
✦ Requires that pet food be safe to eat, produced in sanitary conditions, contain no harmful substances, and labeled accurately and truthfully
✦ Requires product name, net weight, name and location of distributor/manufacturer, and a listing of all the ingredients in the product, ordered from most to least based on weight on all labels
✦ Reviews all health claims on labels
✦ Reports on pet food safety issues affecting public health and safety

Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO)
✦ Non-governmental, but introduces and proposes regulations and guidelines for food labels
✦ Tries to maintain consistency and uniformity in pet food labeling across the country, for consumer awareness, health of animals, and ease of interstate commerce with different manufacturers and distributors
✦ Established the minimum recommended nutrient profiles for dog and cat foods, at two life stages:
  ➢ growth and development
  ➢ adult maintenance

Label Overview

Pet food labels have two main parts:
1. Principal Display Panel (PDP)
2. Information Panel
Principal Display Panel

✦ **Designator** tells you what species the food is for
✦ **Product picture or vignette** shows what the contents actually look like and may include pictures of the ingredients (chicken, vegetables)
✦ “NEW” can only be used in a label if the food was released less than 6 months ago

Product Name

Differences in terms used on pet food labels as described by AAFCO:
✦ “100% Beef” or “All Beef” means a product can contain ONLY that product, in this case, beef
✦ “Beef” by itself means the food must contain at least 70% beef
✦ “Beef dinner” or “entree” or “platter” mean at least 10% of the wet food or 25% of the dry food must contain beef
✦ “With Beef” means it must contain at least 3% beef
✦ “Beef Flavor”:
  ‣ means it’s usually 1% or less of the food
  ‣ is similar to human food using terms like “orange juice” vs “orange drink” or “orange cocktail”

Guaranteed Analysis

AAFCO and FDA require a guaranteed analysis, or GA, on all pet food labels. The GA must include:
✦ Minimum percentage of crude protein
✦ Minimum percentage of crude fat, or maximum if product is low fat
✦ Maximum percentage of crude fiber
✦ Maximum percentage of moisture

When Comparing Wet and Dry GAs:
✦ Crude protein is measured by ALL nitrogen in food, quantity NOT quality
✦ Fat is not broken down into types, such as n-3 or n-6, but rather gives a total estimate of energy in the food
✦ Crude fiber does not represent all types of fiber
✦ An asterisk on the label will denote an nutrient not recognized by AAFCO as an essential nutrient
Ingredients

✦ Ingredients must be listed in descending order by weight, and can only use AAFCO approved names for the ingredients
✦ Weights are on an as-is basis, so if an ingredient is added wet, and will be dried later, it may appear higher on the label even though almost all of its water weight will be lost during processing

Nutritional Adequacy Statement

✦ The Nutritional Adequacy Statement may be stated differently by brand or product
✦ “100% Nutritious”, “100% Complete”, “Completely Nutritious”, or “Complete and Balanced” are all terms that the manufacturer may use to convey that the food is a complete food, i.e. the animal can survive on this food alone
✦ AAFCO allows these terms on labels only after adherence to certain criteria
✦ Claims can be substantiated a number of ways and should appear on the label under the Nutritional Adequacy Statement
✦ Substantiation Methods:
  ‣ Through a feeding trial where animals are fed the product exclusively for a given amount of time and then examined for health, weight loss, blood work
  ‣ Or, through meeting or exceeding the AAFCO nutrient profile determined by a formulation method
  ‣ Formulation methods may not pick up issues that arise during a feeding trial, but is more a “paper method”
  ‣ AAHA and WSAVA strongly recommend feeding trials for substantiation of nutritional adequacy statements
✦ Difference between “All Lifestage” and “Maintenance” Food
  ‣ Final component is a feeding guide giving an estimate of the amount of food to feed the animal based on its weight
  ‣ Veterinary Medical foods used to manage certain diseases or processes; may not fit the AAFCO nutrient profiles for healthy animals

Light, Reduced Calorie, Low-fat

✦ AAFCO only defines “light”, “lite”, “Low Calorie”, lean or low fat, and reduced fat or calories
Therefore, labels with terms like “Weight Control”, “Weight Management” “Weight Loss Formula” “Weight System” or “Healthy Weight” are unregulated and they do not have to fit under AAFCO guidelines.

- “Less” or “Reduced” calories can be used when comparing the product with a higher calorie product.
- Manufacturer must state a percent reduction versus another product in that manufacturer’s line. i.e “10% less fat”
- Must also have feeding directions which reflect reduced calorie intake.
- “Lean” or “low fat” claims based on absolute amount of fat in the product.
- Dog < 9% fat dry/semi-moist food up to 20% moisture
- Cat <10% fat dry/semi-moist food up to 20% moisture
- Surest way is to select a food using regulated terms with absolute cut-offs such as light-low calorie, ensuring that it is below a specific calorie density as suggested by the AAFCO.

**Dental Health Claims**

- AAFCO has guidelines for these claims based on FDA Center for Veterinary Medicine.
- Claims to whiten or cleanse teeth, or freshen breath, do NOT need to be substantiated.
- Claims to reduce plaque or tartar are checked by the Veterinary Oral Health Council, with established guidelines for proof of efficacy.
- If a product passes the review process, the label may display the VOHC seal of approval.

**Organic and Natural Foods**

- Organic is NOT the same as Natural.
- “Natural” defined by AAFCO as one containing only natural ingredients, with the exception of some vitamins and minerals.
- “Organic” means all ingredients contain no antibiotics or growth hormones and must be produced without conventional chemical pesticides, bioengineering, or radiation.
- AAFCO and USDA allow “Organic” on pet food labels if the same human guidelines are met.
- Some trade organizations “certify” products as organic, but these claims are not regulated and not verified.
Human Grade

- There is NO pet food that is “human grade”
- No complete inspection chain (grower--processor--market) exists for pet food, as it does for human food
- The only solution if you want human grade food, is to buy human food from the supermarket and make your own food at home
- Make sure to consult a veterinary nutritionist, preferably board-certified by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition