

There are so many pet food brands out there, how do I decide which is best for my pet?

I get asked this question all the time by my clients. Rather than making a specific recommendation, I suggest my clients consider these guidelines when picking out a new food.

All pet foods on the market must follow the Association of American Feed Control Officials guidelines. AAFCO requires a guaranteed analysis be printed on every bag that provides minimum and maximum levels of four of the nutrients in the food. These are protein, fat, fiber and moisture. The trouble with the minimum and maximum requirement is that this does not show the actual amounts in the diet. In addition, the AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement must be on every bag as well. Manufacturers can use one of two methods. The formulated method requires manufacturers to have laboratory proof that their recipe meets AAFCO standards for feeding dogs and cats. This method is less time consuming and less expensive than the second method, actual feeding trials. Feeding trials require a manufacturer to follow AAFCO protocol and although this only means the test food is fed for 6 months, to 8 animals, this is the preferred method as it provides some evidence that a pet may do well on the food, and not just based on a laboratory analysis of the food. Look for the words “AAFCO animal feeding tests...” on the label.

Pet foods can be classified as a fixed or open formula and they do not have to state which they are on the bag. A fixed formula is preferred as these are diets consistently adhere to the prioritized ingredient list on the label. An open formula allows companies to change the ingredients without changing the label on the bag, as long as they return to the original recipe within 6 months. Changing ingredients may cause diarrhea, vomiting or changes in behavior in pets. You must call and ask the company which formula they use.

Selecting a food for the specific life stage of your pet is very important. While most foods are labeled puppy (or kitten), adult or senior, some are labeled for “all life stages”. Feeding these diets to adult pets can lead to obesity and other diseases as their nutrient profile is what is necessary for a growing puppy or kitten.

Besides looking at the quality of the ingredients (listed in order from highest percentage to lowest) on the label, other important questions to research about a potential food include; What country are the raw ingredients coming from? Where and by whom is the food actually prepared? Are there veterinarians and nutritionists on staff? Can I return the food if my pet won't eat it or has a problem with it?

Good nutrition is the one thing that every pet owner can provide to help ensure their cat or dog has a long and healthy life. Taking the time to do some research to find the best foods for your pet can really make a big difference.

Marianne E. Bailey

South Arundel Veterinary Hospital