



## Choosing A Pet Food

**By Susan Wynn, DVM, Veterinary Nutritionist**

How do you choose a pet food? You don't- you choose a company. So here are my criteria for recommending a food manufacturer:

1. The company needs a track record. Even if it's your best friend whom you consider knowledgeable, the company she owns or recommends needs to prove its ability to produce consistently safe formulations, hold onto the best employees, and is using profits to improve (and not just expand) the company.
2. There should be a board certified veterinary nutritionist on staff. Not just a veterinarian – a veterinary nutritionist. I've seen some very questionable formulations even from companies owned by veterinarians. The only way the formulations can improve over time is if a nutritionist is constantly feeding updated knowledge into those formulations.
3. The company philosophy fits with my clients' standards \*\* and my patient's needs.

Once we settle on a few companies, I have these additional recommendations for my clients:

1. Choose foods that carry an AAFCO feeding claim to be complete and balanced for the appropriate life stage of your pet. Some smaller pet food companies do not produce balanced diets, and others produce pure meat diets "intended for supplemental or intermittent feeding". Nutritional deficiencies could result if any of these are fed long term.
2. Rotate between various companies (i.e. use various flavors , but also from different companies)
3. Avoid exotic ingredients like duck, rabbit, emu, pheasant, and venison. They aren't necessary for healthy pets and we may need for them to be completely new to your pet when diagnosing or treating certain conditions later. There is plenty of variety to be had with chicken, lamb, beef, pork, turkey, fish, egg and vegetarian foods. It's also easier to find organic versions of these ingredients.
4. Feed your dog veggies and fruits as snacks or to beef up the amount of food in his bowl. It may help prevent cancer, and they are low in fat. Avoid grapes, raisins and onions, which can be toxic to pets. Choose all colors, including carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, bell peppers, squash, apples, melon, berries, etc). Feeding more meats and starches is rarely necessary, especially if you are already feeding a premium or Paleolithic diet.
5. Don't buy large bags of food for small animals- food should be used up within a month, especially if it is stabilized with natural preservatives instead of chemical preservatives.
6. Avoid dry foods in cats and if your cat is currently eating dry, make an appointment to talk to a nutritionist about why this may no longer be recommended and how to switch stubborn kitties to canned or homemade food. At the very least, for heavens' sake, do not leave free choice dry food down – for dogs OR cats. Most just get fat on it!

**Seems like a lot to remember, but here is the simple version:**

Feed balanced foods, with healthy ingredients, from different companies. Give veggies and fruits instead of junky treats, and maintain a lean body weight. If you prefer homemade, get the recipe balanced, and stick to the plan. And of course, check in with your vet for regular physical and biochemical exams to find emerging problems early.

**Notes**

\*A nutrient profile shows the levels or concentrations of all essential nutrients in a food . This profile is compared to the nutrient requirements of a dog or cat to determine whether it is marginal, deficient, or replete for a particular life stage or condition.

\*\*Philosophies and standards are unique to each pet owner. Some won't tolerate commercial diets at all, while others don't care if they are commercial as long as they are (pick one – raw, natural, organic, made of human grade ingredients, etc). Some trust larger companies and care only that the correct \*nutrients\* are provided, while others don't care about nutrients and consider \*ingredients\* most important, absolutely prohibiting by-products. A few clients believe that locally sourced ingredients are best (necessitating a homemade diet unless you happen to live near a company that uses ingredients local to \*you\*). If you really want to know, my philosophy necessitates a complete and balanced nutrient profile, identifiable ingredients (although by-products of some types are just fine with me considering the true natural diet of dogs and cats), a veterinary nutritionist on staff, and a company that balances the need for economy with the need to document the safety of their raw ingredients (usually requiring domestically sourced ingredients). The company should be transparent in its operations (some have allowed the WDJ editor to visit their plants, and some regularly invite veterinarians for tours, while others won't answer phone calls). And of course, I think homemade diets are superior as long as they are balanced. I've seen some awful sick animals eating weird homemade recipes, and I've seen so many improve if we just balance while incorporating the owners' preferences!