

A Natural and Biologically Appropriate Diet for Your Pet

By Michelle Lonergan

Feeding a healthy and safe diet to “Fluffy” or “Fido” has become a priority for many pet owners. Pet food recalls are too prevalent, and reading pet food labels can be confusing and deceiving. Regulations for the pet food manufacturing industry are very lack and poorly monitored. Therefore, as pet owners, we must take a proactive role in understanding pet food labels and our pets’ nutritional needs.

Where’s the beef?

Cats are true carnivores and dogs are omnivores (although more accurately classified as “opportunistic carnivores”). A canine’s digestive system is built to thrive on an all meat and bone diet, but can survive on plant life, should their hunting skills fail them. In the wild, a canine’s primary source of carbohydrates (fruits, vegetables and grains) is from the stomach contents of their prey. However, the canine’s primary purpose of eating the stomach lining is for the high levels of digestive enzymes they need to absorb the nutrients in their food.



Often, pet food manufacturers will use inexpensive substitutes for protein such as corn gluten, wheat gluten and soy. Dogs and cats cannot readily absorb protein from plant sources; therefore, the “guaranteed analysis” for protein levels becomes deceiving.

The first ingredient listed on the label should be a meat source. Avoid “meat by-products,” as they are low-quality parts of the animal that are unsuitable for human consumption. They consist of feet, beaks, brains, intestines and some feathers.

Glutton for gluten

Carbohydrates should be fed minimally. Avoid corn, wheat and soy as these are the top three allergens for dogs and cats. Look for whole grains such as barley, rice and oats (listed after a meat). Avoid grain fragments such as brewers rice, peanut hulls, rice hulls and oat hulls. These are the by-product left over after human food processing.

In balance



Although commercially formulated dog and cat food is balanced with the recommended daily allowance set by USDA, it is necessary to add supplements based on your dog’s specific needs. Supplements are essential for optimal health and vitality. Consider adding supplements based on age, weight, skin condition, training intensity, and digestive, urinary tract, joint and hip health.

It’s not what you eat ... it’s what you can absorb

The best nutrition you can provide to your pet is a fresh homemade diet consisting of raw meat, bones and vegetables. Feeding raw diets is more biologically appropriate for a dog’s and cat’s short digestive system. Canine and feline digestive tracts are only a third of the length of ours and, therefore, require fresher food that can be quickly absorbed

before it completes the digestion process (about 12 hours). Raw meat contains high levels of digestive enzymes that are needed for quick absorption. If you are up for the task of making your pet a homemade diet, ensure that the diet is balanced with the supplements your pet requires.



Pre-balanced raw diets that are formulated with the daily allowance of vitamins, minerals and calcium are available at pet food specialty stores. These diets can be fed exclusively or can be added to a dry kibble. For cost consideration, feeding half raw with half kibble will still have a tremendous benefit to your pet than feeding kibble alone.

Will it cost more?

Feeding higher-quality food naturally should cost more. Fortunately, this isn't always the case. Many mass market pet foods that have the perception of being the healthiest foods on the market are not healthy foods at all. Many are owned by large conglomerates that spend tremendous amounts of money on marketing to create a "healthy" image, and have been very successful doing so.

Find an alternative to a prescription diet. Unfortunately the majority is made from the large conglomerate companies and contains meat by-products, corn, soy, animal by-products, grain fragments, and chemical preservatives and has very little meat and sometimes none at all. Many healthy alternatives are available for obesity, allergies, sensitive stomachs, urinary health and early kidney disease. Consult with a holistic vet or pet nutritionist to help you tailor a homemade diet for your pet's specific needs.

Don't be fooled by the perceived "image." Do your own research, or seek the advice of a pet nutritionist or holistic vet to help you tailor the best diet for your pet. In the end, your pet will live a longer, healthier life with fewer medical problems.

Michelle Lonergan owns Tabby & Jack's Pet Supplies and Holistic Grooming in Madison and Fitchburg and has studied pet nutrition her whole life. She is well known in the Madison area for her expertise in healing dogs and cats with a tailored diet, supplements and natural topicals. She works with many holistic vets in the Madison area to manage a health plan through proper nutrition. If you have questions or comments about this article or need advise on tailoring a diet for your pet, please contact Michelle at michelle@tabbyandjacks.com or 608.277.5900, or visit the Web site at www.tabbyandjacks.com.