

WHAT'S IN THEIR BOWL?

HOW TO READ & DECODE A PET FOOD LABEL

WITH BONUS CHECKLIST!



THE NEXT BEST THING TO FEEDING RAW.™

THE PET FOOD INDUSTRY IS COMPLEX, TO SAY THE LEAST.

This is partly because animal nutritional requirements are far different than human needs, and partly because the industry uses jargon and misleading marketing terms that can make consumers feel like they need a Ph.D. in animal nutrition to understand.

If any of this sounds familiar, know that you are not alone. The majority of consumers have a hard time decoding the information on pet food labels, which is why we've put together this easy-to-follow guide. Read on to go behind the scenes of the pet food industry and get a better understanding of what's in your pet's food.



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HOW PET FOOD IS REGULATED IN THE U.S.

In the U.S., pet food is highly regulated and must meet federal and state requirements. An ingredient cannot be used in pet food unless it is accepted by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and adopted by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO).

The FDA enforces pet food regulations on a state-by-state basis, while AAFCO is a private, non-profit organization that develops processes of defining ingredients used in pet food and animal feed products. In the U.S., AAFCO's guidelines are enforced at the state level, but each state can interpret the regulations differently. AAFCO does not approve, certify or endorse pet foods.

The nutritional statements made by a pet food company must be validated by formulation or feeding trials.

-  **Formulation** is when a diet is designed to meet AAFCO guidelines for every required nutrient. To confirm compliance, diets are often tested after they are produced.
-  **Feeding trials** give the food that was created in a lab to controlled groups of dogs or cats of a certain age. The animals' urine, feces and blood are then tested for a specific time frame to verify that the food meets or exceeds nutritional guidelines. Feeding trials are time intensive and costly, which is why most pet food manufacturers rely on the formulation method.










HOW TO DECODE THE CONTENTS OF A PET FOOD LABEL

Just like human food, pet food labels are required to list certain information, including the product name, manufacturer or distributor's address, quantity or weight of the product and what species the food is for (e.g., dog or cat). This information is typically straightforward enough.

However, there are other label requirements that are a bit more difficult to understand. Below is a breakdown of five main sections of a pet food label:

-  AAFCO Statement
-  Ingredients by Weight
-  The Guaranteed Analysis
-  Feeding Guidelines
-  Life Stages

HOW TO DECODE THE CONTENTS OF A PET FOOD LABEL

AAFCO STATEMENT

[According to the FDA](#), pet food that falsely claims to be complete, balanced or suitable for nourishment is a potentially unsafe product. “For this reason, an AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement is one of the most important aspects of a dog or cat food label.”

Here’s an example of an AAFCO statement you might see on a label for cat food:

“Formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Cat Food Nutrient Profiles for All Life Stages.”

In some cases, treats and wet or raw food will meet state regulations, but it will not have an AAFCO statement. Instead, this product will offer the following statement under feeding guidelines: “Intended for intermittent or supplemental feeding only.” This means that this product is not complete and balanced and should not make up more than 20% to 30% of your pet’s daily diet.





INGREDIENTS BY WEIGHT

All ingredients are required to be listed in descending order from highest to lowest weight prior to cooking. In other words, the first ingredients listed on a pet food label will carry the most weight prior to cooking.

THE GUARANTEED ANALYSIS

Pet food must report and list the nutrient content of the product under the Guaranteed Analysis. This is similar to the Nutrition Facts section of a human food label.

There are only four main nutrients that are required to be listed under the Guaranteed Analysis to help consumers compare pet foods:

- | | |
|---|---|
|  Minimum percentage of crude protein |  Maximum percentage of crude fiber |
|  Minimum percentage of crude fat |  Maximum percentage of moisture |

The Guaranteed Analysis is typically located on the back or the side of a pet food package, usually near the ingredients list.

You may find other nutrients listed on the Guaranteed Analysis. This is a way for pet food manufacturers to call out what else is in their food. At any time, anything listed on the Guaranteed Analysis must test as such. In other words, listing anything beyond the required four nutrients is a marketing tactic however, it must be true and accurate as evidenced by testing.

The term “crude” refers to the method of testing the product, not the quality of the nutrient.



HOW TO DECODE THE CONTENTS OF A PET FOOD LABEL

AS FED VS. DRY MATTER

The percentages of the four nutritional guarantees are listed on an “as fed” basis, which means as the food comes out of the bag or can.

Comparing high-moisture foods (like canned or raw) to low-moisture foods (like dry or freeze dried) in the as-fed state is never an even deal. However, there is a simple equation consumers can use to compare high-moisture and low-moisture foods more accurately by determining the nutrients on a dry matter basis, or with the moisture removed.

Step 1

Determine the dry matter of the food. Subtract the percentage of moisture from 100. This number is the percentage of dry matter of the food. Convert this number into a decimal by moving the decimal two places to the left. For example, 90% dry matter would become .90.

Step 2

For the desired nutrient, divide the nutrient percentage by the dry matter decimal. For example, 40% protein with the dry matter decimal of .90 from above would be 40 divided by .90. This equals 44.4, which means there is 44.4% protein on a dry matter basis.

For more details about as fed vs. dry matter and how to use this equation, visit this article on [Dog Food Advisor](#).

Calculating Carb Content

Carb content is not generally listed on pet food labels. You can still get an idea of the percentage of carbs in the bag or can by adding together the four main nutrients listed under the Guaranteed Analysis (crude protein, crude fat, crude fiber and moisture). Then, subtract the sum from 100 and the resulting number is a rough estimate of the carb count. While this isn't an exact count, it will be very close.



HOW TO DECODE THE CONTENTS OF A PET FOOD LABEL

LIFE STAGES

Pet food companies must prove to AAFCO that their food meets the nutritional minimum for the life stages they list on the product. Here are the different life stages you may see:



Adult Maintenance

This refers to pets aged 1 year or older*.



All Life Stages

This covers all ages and can cover all breeds. Products for all life stages should explain the different feeding directions for gestation/lactation, growth and maintenance.



Gestation/Lactation

This refers to pets who are pregnant or nursing



Growth

For cats, this stage refers to kittens. The kitten stage includes the time when they are weaned from their mother up to 1 year old*.

For dogs, this is defined by age and size. You may see a pet food label list the product as being suitable for “puppies, not including the growth of large size dogs.” The term “large size dogs” typically refers to breeds that are 70+ pounds as an adult. The puppy stage includes pets who are weaned from their mother up to 1 to 1.5 years old*.

Here is an example of how pet food may explain its use for certain life stages:

[Pet Food Name] is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Dog Food Nutrient Profiles for All Life Stages including the growth of large size dogs (70 lbs. or more as an adult).

**Ages are approximate.*

AAFCO does not define “senior” or weight management pet foods by life stages.










5 COMMON & MISLEADING PET FOOD MARKETING TERMS

Browse the aisles of any pet food store and you'll find dozens upon dozens of different brands. As a consumer, how are you supposed to determine which product is actually the best for your pet?

With such high competition, marketing is essential for brands to stand out. However, there are a few marketing terms that are used all throughout the industry that can be misleading to the average consumer.

Here are five that you should know about:

-  **The First Ingredient**
-  **Grain-Free**
-  **With**
-  **Gourmet and Premium**
-  **Natural and Organic**

5 COMMON & MISLEADING PET FOOD MARKETING TERMS

THE FIRST INGREDIENT

As we mentioned earlier, ingredients are required to be listed in descending order from highest to lowest weight prior to cooking. So ideally, the first ingredients listed would carry the most weight.

However, just because an ingredient is listed first on a label doesn't necessarily mean that it is the most predominant. Here's an example:

Beef may be listed as the first ingredient on a pet food label, but the food may also contain several different types of starches that, when combined, make up a higher percentage of ingredients than the beef.

Let's say that those starches are listed on a label as potato starch, potato and potato protein. All of these ingredients are potatoes, but the verbiage on the label has listed them as three different ingredients. When the potato ingredients are split on a label, potato becomes the most predominant ingredient after cooking because the beef loses water and fat, which makes it a less predominant ingredient.

GRAIN-FREE

Grain-free means the pet food does not contain corn, wheat, barley, rice and oats. However, this doesn't automatically equate to a low-carb product. High-starch substitute ingredients (like potatoes) can be used instead.

WITH

A product that lists its food being "with chicken" or "with salmon" is only required to contain at least 3% of the mentioned ingredient.

GOURMET AND PREMIUM

Currently, there are no regulations that define when terms like "gourmet" and "premium" can be used on a pet food label.

According to the FDA, pet food products that are labeled as premium or gourmet are not required to contain any different or higher quality ingredients than pet foods that do not use these terms.

NATURAL AND ORGANIC

Pet food labeled as "natural" contains no artificial flavors, artificial colors or artificial preservatives. However, naturally sourced preservatives like vitamin E may be used to naturally preserve fat from turning rancid.

"Organic" is not the same as natural. Organic refers to the condition in which the plants were grown or how the animals were raised. The FDA states that while there are no official rules regulating the labeling of organic foods at this time, the USDA is in the process of developing guidelines that dictate the types of synthetic additives, such as vitamins and purified amino acids, that may be used in pet foods labeled as organic.

It is possible for a pet food to list a single ingredient as organic, like organic chicken. In this instance, the food as a whole may not be labeled as organic unless every ingredient is organic.

Ingredients are required to be listed in descending order from highest to lowest weight prior to cooking. So ideally, the first ingredients listed would carry the most weight.



GLOSSARY OF COMMON INGREDIENTS & TERMS

The ingredients and terms below are used throughout the pet industry, but are often misunderstood.

Ash	<p>Ash is the inorganic material that remains after an organic material is burned. The ash content of a pet food includes calcium, phosphorus, zinc, iron and other essential minerals.</p> <p>Dry pet food almost always contains ash content. PetCareRX recommends dry food with less than 8% (as fed) ash content. Wet food can also contain ash, but ideally at lower levels, around 2% (as fed).</p>
Chelation/ Chelated Minerals	<p>Chelation is a type of bonding of molecules to metal ions.</p> <p>Chelated minerals can be easier for the body to absorb. These are also called organic trace minerals and are bound to an organic molecule, like an amino acid.</p> <p>Examples of chelated materials in pet food include copper chelate and zinc amino acid chelate.</p>
Dehydrated	<p>Dehydrated pet food is minimally processed at low temperatures to preserve as much nutritional value as possible.</p>
Guar Gum, Cassia Gum, Carrageenan, Xanthan Gum	<p>These are thickening agents found in most processed foods. These ingredients do not offer any nutritional value</p>
Human Grade	<p>This term cannot be listed on pet food labels, but it can be used to describe a pet food in literature or in marketing materials on the company's website.</p> <p>In order to be human grade, the ingredient(s) must be fit for human consumption (edible) and made in a human food facility. If human grade ingredients are used to make pet food in a pet food facility, it cannot be considered human grade.</p> <p>The USDA states that products that are deemed fit for human consumption are officially known as "edible." AAFCO notes that "edible is a standard; human-grade is not."</p> <p>Pet foods are specifically formulated for pets and are not likely to be nutritionally adequate for a human.</p>



Meat Meal (Chicken Meal or Beef Meal)	<p>Meat meal is a rendered product that is sourced from meat that is generally not fit for human consumption.</p> <p>Chicken meal and beef meal are two of the most common meat meals. These products must contain meat from the animal the name suggests, so chicken meal must contain chicken. However, poultry meal can be any type of poultry and the contents can change from batch to batch.</p>
Meat or Poultry By-Products	<p>AAFCO defines by-products as the non-rendered parts of slaughtered animals other than meat. Examples include lungs, spleens, kidneys, brain, livers, blood, bone and stomachs.</p>
Mixed Tocopherols	<p>This is a naturally sourced preservative and a source of vitamin E, which helps preserve the food's shelf life.</p>
Protein Digestibility	<p>This is a way to determine protein quality or the ability of the body to utilize the protein consumed. Cooking pet food at high temperatures degrades amino acids and lowers the protein efficiency.</p> <p>This term is not found on pet food labels, but it is important to understand.</p>
Rendering/Rendered	<p>Rendering is a process that uses high temperatures and pressure to remove water and fat from meat. This process also removes harmful bacteria that could cause illness.</p> <p>Rendered ingredients are typically cooked in very large batches and have hard-to-trace origins. 4D meat (meat derived from deceased, dying, diseased or disabled animals that is unfit for human consumption) and meat meal are put through the rendering process.</p> <p>This term is not found on pet food labels.</p>




CHECKLIST: 10 THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN PET FOOD

Now that you have a better understanding of the labels, ingredients and terms, use this checklist to grade your current pet food or evaluate a new pet food.

At the minimum, you should be able to check off the first six items on this list. The last four items are a bonus; if you can check those off too, then the pet food is excellent!

- NO unnamed animal ingredients or by-products.**
This means no meat meal, animal meal or poultry by-product meal.
- NO corn, wheat or soy.**
- NO artificial colors.**
Examples are Red No. 40 or Blue No. 2.
- NO artificial preservatives.**
Like BHT, BHA, ethoxyquin or propylene glycol.
- YES, the pet food label includes a nutritional adequacy or AAFCO statement.**
*This verifies that the food meets the AAFCO nutrient guidelines for the appropriate life stage of your pet.
Example: [Brand Name/Product Name] has been formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Dog Food Nutrient Profiles for All Life Stages including the growth of large size dogs (70 lbs. or more as an adult).*
- YES, the food contains named animal ingredients.**
Like chicken, dehydrated turkey or menhaden fish meal.
- YES, there are at least two fresh, dehydrated or meal animal proteins in the first 7 ingredients.**
Examples include chicken, dehydrated turkey or menhaden fish meal.
- YES, there are more animal than plant ingredients in the first 7 listed ingredients.**
- YES, organ meat is listed in the first 7 ingredients**
Examples include chicken liver or turkey hearts.
- YES, the food contains chelated minerals.**
Examples include copper chelate, zinc proteinate and iron proteinate.





WHEN ONLY THE BEST WILL DO

RAWZ is proud to check all the boxes on the 10 Things to Look for in Pet Food Checklist!

At RAWZ, we only use the highest quality ingredients in our cat and dog food recipes.

We've spent years working with leading pet nutritionists to develop recipes that are minimally processed, offering the highest meat and are 100% nutritionally complete.

Our recipes are the perfect balance of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins and minerals to provide optimal nutrition for all life stages and all breeds. RAWZ is also:

-  Meal-Free
-  Rendered-Free
-  Naturally Preserved
-  Gum-Free
-  Certified Low Glycemic
-  Potato-Free

When you purchase RAWZ, you are directly supporting both pets and humans. Through [The RAWZ Fund](#), we donate 100% of our profits to non-profit organizations that provide service dogs and rehabilitation services for those affected by traumatic brain or spinal cord injuries.

Browse our wet and dry food options, learn more about our 100% profits donated pledge, and find a local or online retailer at rawznaturalpetfood.com.

