

Food For Thought

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After seven years of college study preparing to be a veterinarian and 25 years of practical experience with pets, I am still amazed and slightly shocked on a daily basis. These shocks usually result from conversations with pet owners when I inquire, "And what do you feed your pet?" and the reply, "Oh, whatever's on sale."

The numbers of dog and cat patients veterinarians treat that are suffering from nutrition-related disorders is way out of proportion to what might be expected. With the advanced knowledge of pet nutrition readily available to every pet owner, there really is no excuse for the large numbers of cats and dogs afflicted with nutrition-related problems.

In my experience, the most common identifying sign of poor nutritional status in my patients has been dry, flaky skin and sparse, coarse, brittle hair coat. Contrast this image to a pet that has a full, shiny, soft coat with healthy-looking skin. It doesn't require any special education to observe your pet and simply decide if the skin and coat are healthy-looking. If they aren't you must evaluate what you are feeding before you do anything else. Other factors such as skin mites (mange), allergies, autoimmune disorders, genetic defects and bacterial/fungal infections will certainly damage the skin and coat. These disorders must be diagnosed by your veterinarian, but remember, any treatment will be less effective (and possibly ineffective) if the pet lacks basic nutritive input.

Studies indicate that as many as 60 percent of pets in America are overweight. Simply put, they are taking in more calories than they are burning off through physical activity. Believe it or not, an overweight pet can still be malnourished, and often is!

A diet may be too high in calories and yet too low in essential amino acids (protein), essential fatty acids, vitamins or minerals. Overweight pets that are put on low-calorie reducing diets are at even greater risk of malnourishment due to lower nutritional density of food consumed and the resultant reduction of nutrients they do need.

I have a question. Why is it that for so many pet owners the first place to "skimp" and "economize" is in the price they'll pay for pet food? The "whatever's on sale" mindset shows either a lack of understanding of good pet nutrition or a pathetic disregard for the health of the animals in their care. You can skimp or cut corners on other nonessential things, or have fewer pets, but to skimp on your pet's daily source of life-giving sustenance is inexcusable.

I am going to assume that many pet owners simply have not been properly informed of the fundamental role good nutrition plays in the optimal health of their pet. The reason for this lack of knowledge is due to two factors--both correctable.

Factor 1 Less-than-aggressive informational input by some pet health professionals. Veterinarians, groomers, breeders, kennel operators and pet store owners must do a better job of informing the pet-owning public about the good brands of pet foods available and the need to avoid the generic, cheap imitations so often chosen by pet owners.

At the same time, pet owners should be willing to trust the pet professionals' advice. Often pet professionals are not taken seriously, since many pet owners believe we're only trying to "sell 'em something." There's a built-in resistance to spend more money on a quality food because the pet

owner perceives a profit motive driving the pet professional's advice. The pet professional must, therefore, not sell the product, but rather knowledgeably explain to and inform the pet owner of the advantage to the pet of a higher-quality food. The food will then sell itself! The pet will look and feel better; the customer will see the results and return to purchase more of the higher-quality food.

Factor II Ambiguous labeling of pet food products. Some pet food producers use eye-catching, confidence-building descriptives that give insufficient information about the type and quality of the ingredients in the food. As a pet food purchaser you should ask yourself what these descriptions really mean. Their intention may be to have you believe you are purchasing a good-quality product, when in fact what is in the can or bag may only contain digestible nutrients sufficient to meet minimum nutritional requirements for an average dog or cat.

What if your pet isn't average? Then you may see evidence of nutritional inadequacies such as poor weight maintenance, dry, flaky, itchy skin and brittle, coarse hair. Regardless of what "eye-catching" descriptions are used on the label, you must look at each pet to see how the diet performs for that individual.

Let us start right now to intelligently assess what we're calling pet food and to recognize how a good quality pet food will promote a quality life experience for our pets.

I'll share with you some basic concepts I've learned through more than 25 years of hands-on veterinary practice. These basic observations of pet health as it is influenced by nutrition have been sharpened by my own critical view of sales reps' high-pressure tactics, sweeping generalizations and outright misrepresentations. Not being content to accept claims or hype regarding the multitude of products thrown at the customer, I've always demanded to see some facts. Quite honestly, facts are often lacking, generalizations abound and critical analysis of "standards" are still missing. Keep the following concepts in mind the next time you reach for your pet's "daily bread."

1. YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR.

This concept is based on the inescapable fact that the higher the cost of the food's ingredients, the easier they are for the pet to digest and use for biochemical processes. For example, egg whites are highly digestible and have excellent nutritive value, but they are expensive. Therefore, most pet foods don't contain egg whites. Corn and soy bean meal, on the other hand, provide only marginal nourishment for dogs and cats and are relatively inexpensive. Not surprisingly, they are often the foundation for many pet food diets! The pet food industry is well aware of the cost-conscious consumer; anything to keep that bag or can of food less expensive to produce is of paramount importance. So remember, in general, the higher the price, the better the quality and digestibility of the ingredients.

It is a fact that a pet consuming a highly digestible food will require less of this food than if consuming a poorly digestible food. Another way to state this is: To maintain a certain level of health, a pet needs to eat more pounds of cheap food than expensive food. If you feed more cheap food, you'll certainly have to buy more (and have more fecal waste!), so is the consumer really saving money on this kind of program? (Study Table 1. It's a good, simple guide.)

2. A BRAND OF FOOD YOU'VE "ALWAYS FED" MAY NOT BE SO GOOD!

While discussing diet with pet owners and upon making the recommendation to change to a better product, I'm often hit with the statement, "But Doc, I've always fed XYZ Brand to my dogs and they've all done just fine." If an individual is resistant to discovering something new or better, or ways to improve on obvious deficiencies, there's really no point in talking any further. This pet

owner hasn't given himself or herself a chance to see that there can be a difference in how the pet looks and acts! All the person sees is what he or she has always seen and observes to be normal and will never have anything better to compare it to. I'm tempted to ask this person, "If you've always ridden a horse to get you around, would you not drive a car simply because a horse has always worked out OK?"

TABLE 1	
<u>Good Quality Food</u>	<u>Average Quality Food</u>
1. Main ingredients-meat, lamb, fish, chicken	1. Main ingredient-corn, wheat, rice, soybean meal
2. Higher purchase price	2. Low purchase price
3. High digestibility	3. Inefficient digestibility
4. Low fecal waste	4. Lots of clean-up required
5. Less required by pet to maintain health	5. More required to maintain health
6. Usually doesn't have dyes to enhance its appearance and is not promoted through ambiguous claims	6. Often promoted as "looks like" real meat or cheese, contains food dyes with interesting colors

3. LOOK AT THE INGREDIENTS.

This is your best guide to the quality of the food. By law, every bag or can of pet food must list the ingredients in descending order according to weight. This means the major ingredient is listed first, then the second most prominent and so on. Personally, I'd rather see meat by-products, lamb, fish meal or chicken listed first than corn, and I'd also expect to pay more than for the corn diet. Per pound of food, my pet will derive more benefit from the meat-based diet than the vegetable-based diet. Dogs and cats may be "domesticated" behaviorally, but we humans cannot do a quick digestive fix on creatures whose physiology and anatomy have evolved over millions of years and based upon predator-prey (carnivorous) food acquisition. Sure, it would be more convenient for us if our pets were herbivores - but let's quit pretending that our pets are primarily plant eaters simply because it would be easier and less expensive for us if they were.

4. IF IT SAYS 'HIGH PROTEIN' ON THE LABEL, IT MUST BE HIGH QUALITY.

The high-protein label means absolutely nothing, but it sure sells a lot of food for the manufacturer! I could put together a high-protein diet for pets that provides no nutritive value whatsoever - they'd die of malnutrition in a month!

What you need to know about the protein in pet food is the source of the protein. Guess what? Feathers, cow hoofs, leather (rawhide), hair and beaks are mostly protein, but as a food source they are not very digestible. Cows and horses do utilize corn and other plant material quite well, partially due to their relatively long digestive tracts and extended time it takes the ingested food to transit the digestive tract. Meat-eaters (dogs and cats) do not digest corn, soybean meal and other vegetable sources of protein very well due in part to their relatively short intestinal tracts and fast transit times. In addition, the dog and cat pancreas (a gland absolutely essential for digestion) does not secrete any enzymes to break down plant cellulose for carbohydrate utilization.

Think about this for a moment. If your dog or cat was lost and on its own looking for food, would you ever find it out in a corn or soybean field foraging for an easy meal? Of course not. A dog or

cat would starve to death in a corn field! Why, then, do we insist on feeding our pets diets that are composed mostly of corn, soybeans, wheat, barley or rice? It defies common sense as well as biological sense.

Don't misunderstand me, I am not saying that grains such as corn, beans, rice, barley and fiber fillers such as beet pulp and ground peanut hulls are bad for dogs and cats. In the correct amounts and combinations they can play a role in good pet nutrition. However, I am saying that just because grains are cheap, easy to wrap a label around, store conveniently and don't need refrigeration, they should not be the foundation for a diet formulated for creatures that are primarily meat-eaters!

Here's how to tell what protein is OK to feed and what sources are poor quality for dogs and cats. Keep Table 2 with you and do a little research by cruising the labels of pet foods. Remember Factor 1 - the higher the quality of digestibility, the higher the price.

Digestibility, as it relates to protein, is the measure of how well the animal can break the unabsorbable large protein molecules into smaller, absorbable amino acids in the intestine. There are numerous types of amino acids, some of which are essential for good health; egg whites have lots of different amino acids and corn only a few. For the dog or cat, egg whites are about the best source of easily digestible protein, so egg whites are given a value of 1.0 on the digestibility scale. Table 2 shows how other proteins stack up to eggs for digestibility.

You can see from the rankings in this table which protein sources provide the best digestibility. Now you should be thinking, "If a product is labeled high protein, so what?" You want to know the source of the protein by looking at the ingredient list on the bag or can of food. And take a close look at CORN as a protein source! CORN is primarily a carbohydrate source and has limited value as a source of protein because of its limited amino acid content. CORN cannot be considered a good source of protein in spite of what many pet food manufacturers would like the consumer to believe!

Protein Digestibility List

These values are approximate and were taken from various nutrition sources and from personal communication with nutrition experts.

<u>TABLE 2</u>	
Egg Whites	1.0
Muscle Meats (Poultry, Beef, Lamb)	.92
Organ Meats (kidney, liver, heart) meat by-products	.90
Milk, Cheese	.89
Fish	.75
Soy	.75
Rice	.72
Oats	.66
Yeast	.63
Wheat	.60
Corn	.54

5. JUST BECAUSE YOUR PET LOVES THE FOOD YOU'RE FEEDING DOES NOT PROVE THE FOOD IS HIGHLY NOURISHING.

Give a child a choice and his or her diet would consist of fries and chocolate malts. Give your pet a choice and the diet quality may not be optimal either. You must choose wisely and provide responsibly a diet that will promote optimal health, not just barely meet minimum or "average" requirements. Most cheap pet foods were deliberately formulated to just barely meet a dog's minimum nutritional requirements.

Pet owners have an obligation to provide their pets with reasonably adequate food, water and shelter. So, equipped with your knowledge of basic nutrition, to feed a poor quality diet is plain and simply unfair to your pet. Keep in mind that if your pet gulps down its food ravenously, it may be doing so because it needs more than what it's been getting. It doesn't mean that it's a great food because the pet eats it so well.

In my opinion:

Of the literally hundreds of brands of pet foods available to the consumer, there are a limited number which approach what I would call "good quality". These have as their foundation (first or second ingredient) meat, lamb, fish or chicken. Also, meat by-products are especially beneficial to pets. Meat by-products, according to the definition established by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), do not contain hair, horns, teeth or hoofs but do include organ tissue such as liver, kidneys, heart, blood and lungs.

These diets that contain meat or fish protein as their foundation will be superior to vegetable-based feeds in their life-giving nourishment for our dog and cat friends. And all you have to do is read the label!

It is my contention that many brands of pet foods are woefully overrated in their ability to properly nourish dogs and cats. Often these foods are purposely designed to meet minimum standards for health maintenance. Our pets are the innocent victims of a pet food industry that is resistant to change what for the industry is a good thing - cheap products that sell. Do you want proof of my contention?

Well, the best objective proof lies in the fact that multi-millions of dollars are spent by pet owners on supplements such as vitamins, omega fatty acids, digestive enzymes, zinc, fiber and other nutrients to correct deficiencies in their pets' health. A really good diet requires no supplementing and in fact should not be supplemented.

For subjective proof ask any veterinarian why so many patients are obese or suffering from dry, itchy, flaky skin and poor coats. Why are there so many "allergic dermatitis" cases? Why are so many dogs eating ravenously and yet are thin and cannot maintain weight properly? Perhaps being fed "whatever's on sale" has something to do with it.

If pet health professionals would do a little better job of stressing the importance - no, the necessity - of optimum nutrition, and if pet food purchasers would be a little less price conscious and a little more discriminating when they make that purchase decision, then a multitude of minimally nourishing pet foods would no longer be available to consumers.