

I routinely ask pet owners what kind of food they feed their pet. Mostly I ask for medical and health reasons, but I'll admit part of me just wants to hear for the pure entertainment value. I think I've heard about every possible "diet" out there. Cooked chicken, pasta with tomato sauce, vegetarian, bacon and eggs, hamburger meat, top sirloin, and cooked salmon with rice are just a few of the innovative nutritional approaches I've come across. Sometimes I wonder if pet owners are providing for the nutritional needs of their pets or running a Bed and Breakfast. And these are just the home cooked foods; the menu of fast-food options is another story.

There's no question animal nutrition can be a difficult issue for pet owners. It's hard enough for people to follow human dietary advice, let alone address those same thorny issues with their pet. The pet food industry is a multi-national, multi-billion dollar industry, with a very large marketing budget. Consequently, we hear a lot of claims from these pet food makers about what's right for our pets. We know that some of this information is accurate, some is not, but one thing for sure, all of it is intended to get you to buy their product. So how do you know what to believe? Actually, appropriate nutrition for your pet is simpler than you might think.

With the exception of the relatively rare pet with food allergies, most healthy dogs and cats will thrive on most major brands of commercial diets. In recent years a lot has been made of "life stage" diets. These are special diets designed specifically for the adolescent, adult or older pet. There is some merit in this approach as the growing puppy has clearly different nutritional needs than the 10 year-old dog.

How then do you choose a pet food for your pet? It's not like you don't have enough choices. The label on the can or bag will have some valuable information, but not as much as you might think. Most pet owners focus on the two most visible sections of the pet food label-the ingredient list and the guaranteed analysis. Interestingly, these two features of a pet food label tell a pet owner relatively little about the nutritional adequacy of the diet.

Unless your pet has a true sensitivity to a specific dietary ingredient (remember this is fairly uncommon) the ingredient list is not that helpful. We are conditioned (or told outright) by the pet food industry that certain ingredients are "good" and others are "bad" for our pets, but these statements rarely, if ever, come with any scientific justification. Meat or poultry "by-products" are ingredients we're often told to avoid. I've never understood why there is such a phobia about by-products. By-products are various tissues not usually considered for human consumption such as organ meats, udder, intestinal tissue, and connective tissue. These ingredients may not sound so appetizing, but in fact can be appropriate and nutritious ingredients in pet foods. I know of no objective evidence that "by-products" in pet foods are a concern, or diminish the quality of the food.

The guaranteed analysis is virtually worthless to the consumer because it lists protein, fat, moisture (water), and other ingredients-not in actual percentages-but in maximum or minimum percentages. For example, if a label says in the guaranteed analysis that the diet contains a minimum of 10 % fat, we can't tell in the diet is 10%, 15%, or even 35% or more fat. This is very important if we're looking to keep our pet at an ideal body weight. For this reason I discourage pet owners from trying to make any

sense out of the guaranteed analysis. Ironically, it doesn't "guarantee" anything about the food.

The pet food label does have information that can help you select an appropriate diet for your pet. Most labels will have a statement of intended purpose of the diet (for growth, maintenance, lactation, etc) and how the diet's adequacy for that purpose was determined. This is the easy part. Match the diet's purpose to your pet's life stage (i.e., "growth" for a puppy). Watch out for the diet that says it is adequate for "all life stages" which means it supposedly is appropriate for adolescent as well as older animals. We wouldn't want to feed such a diet to an older pet because it likely contains too much protein, minerals and fat if it's appropriate for a growing animal. Additionally look on the label to see if the diet has undergone AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) feeding trials to determine its nutritional adequacy. AAFCO feeding trials are the gold standard for determining nutritional adequacy of pet foods.

Generally speaking, if you can find a diet your pet will eat, is matched to his or her life stage, and is substantiated by AAFCO feeding trials, it's unlikely you'll have to worry about nutritional problems with your pet.

If you still have questions or concerns about choosing a food for your pet, call your veterinarian. He or she knows your pet's particular nutritional needs best and is your most valuable resource.

Dr. John Huebner practices companion animal medicine at Redwood Veterinary Hospital in Vallejo, CA. You can send your pet health questions to Dr. Huebner in care of the Vallejo Times Herald, (440 Curtola Parkway, Vallejo CA. 94590) or e-mail him at rdwdvet@aol.com.