Decoding Pet Food Labels
Helping Pet Owners Read the Fine Print

Pet owners are often label readers; but reading pet food labels can trigger questions. The following FAQ provides common-sense answers to common questions.

**CLIENT QUESTIONS**

**DVM RESPONSES**

**“My pet’s food contains wheat gluten. Isn’t gluten bad?”**

Gluten is a protein from certain grains and contains essential nutrients and amino acids. The vast majority of pets don’t have adverse reactions to wheat gluten.

Not necessary for cats and dogs.

**The bottom line**: While a gluten-free pet food can be good, avoiding wheat gluten is not necessary for cats and dogs.

**“Isn’t whole chicken better for my pet than chicken meal?”**

Meat, poultry or fish meal is simply meat/poultry/fish that is cooked and dried to a powered-like consistency, which concentrates the protein. The amount of chicken that can be used in dry foods is limited by the high moisture content. Both whole chicken and chicken meal can provide excellent sources of protein.

**The bottom line**: Meat, poultry and fish don’t have to be whole to be nutritious.

**“Ugh. This pet food label says the food contains ‘meat by-products.’ I wouldn’t eat by-products; why should my pet?”**

By-products from chicken and other meats are the nutritious, edible portions of animals, including organ meats such as liver and kidney, that would otherwise go to waste because they aren’t widely consumed by people in American culture, but are consumed in other cultures.

Also, by-products are often the first part of the prey consumed by wild hunters.

**The bottom line**: Meat-by-products are highly nutritious.

**“Why does the therapeutic diet you prescribed for my pet have such a long ingredient list? I thought fewer ingredients were better.”**

Do you eat one food or multiple, varied foods? Choices are your diet includes protein and fat sources, grains, fruits and vegetables. Why? Both pets and people need a variety of different food ingredients because no single food—no matter how nutritious—provides everything needed.

Many pet owners eat a single commercial pet food every day, but—like you—they require a variety of food ingredients. This variety must be found within the bag or can of food they eat, and food ingredients are carefully selected by pet nutritionists to deliver important nutrients.

Therapeutic diets, which are designed for pets with specific health conditions, may contain greater or lesser amounts of key nutrients (e.g., protein or fat) than a well-pet food. Because pets with health conditions have very specific nutrient needs, the use of small amounts of many different ingredients can result in a longer-than-usual ingredient list.

**The bottom line**: It’s the quality—not the quantity—of the ingredients that counts.

Using Nutritional Assessments to Provide Personalized Care

Information about pet nutrition is more accessible than ever before — and pet owners are eager to find it. As veterinarians, we should commend our clients for their interest in their pets’ nutrition; however, the information they find on their own may not always be accurate. For veterinarians, this presents two challenges: (a) clients may rely on information we don’t agree with and (b) clients may feel less reliant on us for nutrition advice.

My opinion, conducting routine nutritional assessments can play an important role in keeping veterinarians involved in the daily care of our patients. These evaluations can demonstrate our professional expertise, solidify the trusting relationships we have with clients and uncover health issues that might otherwise go unnoticed.

**What is a nutritional assessment?**

Nutritional assessments are two-step process. First, a screening evaluation assesses the patient’s current nutrition, activity level and age, including risk factors known to influence nutritional status (see Figure 1). When the screening reveals one or more nutrition-related risk factors are confirmed or suspected, an extended evaluation should be conducted that thoroughly analyzes the animal, diet, feeding and environmental factors that may impact the patient’s nutritional status. This information can then be used to devise a treatment plan.

**Set the nutritional record straight**

I am often amazed at the detailed answers clients give when I ask about their pet’s diets. Many demonstrate pride in the quality of their pets’ diets and the amount of research they put into finding the best options. However, they often can’t give clear answers about why they chose certain diets.

Unfortunately, clients often fall victim to popular trends that may not be based on sound science. Here, the nutritional assessment becomes a tool we can use to counteract suspect advice from questionable sources they find online or in the pet food aisle.

These sources can work against our recommendations. One of the most common examples is the client who proudly describes his or her dog’s grain-free diet. When I ask if the dog has had a reaction to grain, the answer is typically no — a clear sign that the decision was based on the misinformed notion that grain-free diets are simply “better.” I then explain the plentiful benefits dogs can get from grains, provided they have no reaction or allergy to it.

Not every dietary issue patients face can be diagnosed from lab work; asking the right questions about diet as part of patient assessment can be invaluable. I recently saw a client who was having difficulties getting her pet to eat a prescription diet. With some prompting, I learned that because the dog was refusing to eat at meal time, the client was feeding scraps from the table. We discussed how this behavior was encouraging the dog to reject the new food and, alternatively devised ways to make the diet more palatable during the transition period.

More and more, our jobs as veterinarians include counteracting suspect nutritional advice and demonstrating our willingness to exceed client expectations. Nutritional assessments can be used as a tool to build trusting relationships with our clients and provide the level of care our patients deserve.

**Figure 1**

**NUTRITIONAL SCREENING EVALUATION: RISK FACTORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Check (-) if present</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
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<tr>
<td>Altered gastrointestinal function (e.g., vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, flatulence)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Previous or ongoing medical conditions/disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>Currently receiving medications and/or dietary supplements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unconventional diet (e.g., raw, homemade, vegetarian, unfamiliar)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snacks, treats, table food &gt;10% of total calories</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inadequate information about or inappropriate feeding management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inadequate or inappropriate housing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body condition score (any score less than 4 or greater than 5 on a 9-pt scale)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muscle condition score: Mild, moderate or marked muscle wasting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unintended weight loss of &gt;10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dental abnormalities or disease</td>
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<td>Poor skin or hair coat</td>
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<tr>
<td>New medical conditions/disease</td>
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Source: 2010 AAHA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines for Dogs and Cats

**Key Takeaways**

- The quality of a pet food cannot be determined by simply reading an ingredient label. Because ingredient quality can vary considerably, the expertise and longevity of a food manufacturer can be a more reliable indicator of product quality than an ingredient list.
- While pets are considered family members by many owners, physiological differences between dogs and cats and people may make it unnecessary, or even inadvisable, for certain pets to be fed like human family members who eat gluten-free or vegetarian diets.
- Conducting nutritional assessments during routine veterinary visits can help keep veterinarians in the nutritional driver’s seat, as well as uncover health issues that might otherwise go unnoticed.