



Selecting Commercial Pet Food: A No-Nonsense Guide



How do you choose the best commercial pet food for your pets?

The answer to this question varies, depending on so many factors.

We consider not just the type of pet you have but also pre-existing medical conditions, age, size, weight, current diet, and your observations as a pet owner. It's not true that you need to steer clear of lower-priced commercial pet food; many brands are sold for sensible prices but backed by many years of science in pet nutrition.

On the other hand, expensive pet food brands promise you the moon and stars but are not based on the soundest of principles. Science-backed pet nutrition is always the safest and most effective.

The principles of pet nutrition have the same goals as human nutrition; we want to ensure that your pet lives and long, healthy, and pain-free life. But unfortunately, they don't have any other source of nutrition apart from the meals you provide, so it falls upon you, the pet owner, to know better and make the soundest decisions for your pets.

What are the Essential Criteria for Selecting Pet Food?

The World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) provides pet owners and veterinary professionals with essential criteria for picking the best pet food for cats and canines. Among these guidelines are:



1. It is selecting commercial pet food that reputable and responsible manufacturers make.
2. Picking pet food that manufacturers have rigorously checked for quality and safety.
3. Check the pet food label for appropriate statements from the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO).
4. Pet food manufacturers should make research and product information publicly available for consumer perusal to investigate and ask about product information.

For further details, be sure to check out the [*toolkit*](#) provided by the WSAVA Global Nutrition Committee. Even if you're not a vet, you will significantly benefit from knowing the key indicators used for assessing an animal's condition and its diet.

The Bigger Picture: The Factors that Contribute to Better Pet Food

Choosing the right pet food can be stressful for both old and new pet owners. Pets can't talk; they can't tell you if the food is causing them malaise or tummy aches.

We can only observe them and monitor their reactions and vital signs if they are in a vet's office or an animal hospital. But never fear—a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to the safety and quality of pet food should clarify at least some of the questions you may have about how to pick the right pet food.

How Can You Tell if a Pet Food Company is Responsible?

Pet food companies come in a vast spectrum of animal nutrition expertise. Some companies break into the market because of current capitalization from another industry. In contrast, others began small and built their reputation over years of R&D. Again, and the best manufacturers aren't always the ones who charge an arm and a leg for their bags of cat food or dog food.

There are affordable brands that are wholly supported by sound veterinary science. If you're interested in asking a company about their methods, you can always call them first and ask the representative to tell you about their R&D efforts and what their brand is about.

They *should* be able to give you at least an overview of their pet food. It's never about the marketing and consistently about what's been going on in their production line and research efforts.



Does the manufacturer have at least one full-time nutrition on board? Ideally, the nutritionist should have a doctorate in animal nutrition. In addition, this person should ideally be board-certified by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition. Suppose you're buying from a manufacturer in another country. In that case, the same criteria apply—that persons should have had extensive training in animal nutrition and should be board-certified by the equivalent institution in the originating country.

Having a knowledgeable and responsible nutritionist differs from purchasing a recipe from an animal nutritionist. These two are not equivalent, and you should be wary of any claims that sound shady.

Now, if the manufacturer does not have a full-time, board-certified, doctorate degree-holding animal nutritionist on board, then who formulates the cat food or dog food? Who decides the ratios and the source of the carbohydrates, fats, proteins, etc.? The animal nutrition expert should have equivalent or more training (as stated previously). Pet food manufacturers shouldn't be skimping on the qualifications of the professionals who formulate their products.



How Are They Performing Quality Control and Safety Testing on their Products?

Quality control and safety testing are meaningless if the pet food manufacturer does not have a stellar team of food scientists and the best and most dedicated animal nutritionists in the industry.

You're not buying pet food from a passionate suburban pet owner who likes to make homemade pet food. You're buying from a manufacturer with millions in capitalization. So there's *no reason* they shouldn't have the best scientists on their team.



It would help if you asked more questions when the pet food manufacturer can't give you a straight one when asked who oversees the formulation and testing of all their pet food products. If they can't give a straight answer, you can go up several rungs higher and contact corporate if you wish.

If you still can't get an answer, steer clear of their products because it's likely that they're not investing in the right people to ensure that their products are safe for animal consumption. Just because our fluffy companions are not humans does not mean that they deserve anything less safe or suitable for them. Complete your assessment of the company with the following questions:

1. *Do you own the plant where you manufacture and quality-check your products?*
2. *What quality control measures do you presently employ?*

Smaller pet food manufacturers often lack the capital to construct their manufacturing facilities, which limits their ability to oversee product quality. Regardless of who makes your pet's food, it must undergo rigorous quality control measures to ensure it's always safe, consistent, and full of nutrients.

Manufacturer certification, ingredient and final product testing for nutrient content, pathogens, and aflatoxins, materials risk assessments, and supplier audits are all quality control measures that pet food manufacturers should routinely apply in their production efforts. But, unfortunately, take one block away from this pyramid of pet food safety, and everything comes tumbling down.

As we've discussed previously, all pet foods should have AAFCO statements. AAFCO statements help specify if the pet food product offers balanced nutrition for different stages of the pet's life. If not, the statement should show you *when* the pet food is best used.

Pert owners can discover so many new things from just checking the pet food label. The information truly matters for your pet's health.

Does the pet food provide a balanced diet for the specific period of your pet's life?

If the pet food doesn't provide a balanced diet, you should see (in small print) that it's meant only for **intermittent or supplemental feeding**. This means that you shouldn't rely on pet food for daily meals as it does not contain the daily nutrients that a cat or dog needs to remain healthy.





Is it unclear what methodology the manufacturer uses to establish that their pet food products are nutritionally adequate?

If a company wants to ensure its food is nutritionally adequate, they have the option of conducting either non-invasive feeding trials or analytical testing. Pet food that's already been evaluated should bear the statement "[this food] is formulated to meet AAFCO nutrient profiles." Manufacturers should test for both nutrient balance and safety.

Nutritional profiles and feeding trial requirements are available from AAFCO for development, reproduction, and maintenance in adulthood. Presently, AAFCO does not provide specific guidelines for senior animals. Therefore, pet foods suitable for all stages of life must provide the nutrients necessary for proper growth and adulthood.

Growth foods must now bear a new mandatory notation that informs consumers whether they are suitable for large breed dogs or otherwise.

Pet food companies making health claims about their products without supporting research from reputable sources should be questioned further to determine the basis for their claims. Consumers should proceed with caution if such evidence of benefit is not provided. When deciding on a diet, it's always better to have as much information as possible. Clinical trials involving research colony animals or household pets have examined the efficacy of various diets.

While the pet food industry has made great strides in understanding how best to nourish our animal companions, there is still much more we must learn.

Toward a Better Understanding of Pet Nutrition

Your pet may prefer to eat right off your plate. But liking something doesn't make it healthy for them. A pet that regularly eats from the family table may quickly balloon in size.

Over half of all canines and felines in the country are overweight or obese. As a result, protein-rich diets are popular with canine eaters. And because they originated as hunters, cats are natural carnivores.

Protein is essential for normal cellular development, muscle and tissue repair, and overall health. It's taurine or bust for cats. They require it to see, to have healthy hearts, and to have offspring.

You can only get taurine from protein sources derived from animals. This is because a cat's body absorbs nutrients from animal-based proteins.

Fats used in cooking can be either animal fats or oils extracted from seeds. They provide most of the calories in your pet's diet. Fats have over twice the energy of proteins or carbohydrates per gram. These are a source of the fatty acids that a dog or cat's body needs but cannot produce. Omega-3 fatty acids, among others, are essential for the following reasons:



- Maintaining healthy coat and skin
- Helping your pet naturally generate hormones vital for physiological processes
- Maintain or enhance absorption of micronutrients (mainly vitamins and minerals)
- Enhance the animal's natural insulation

Carbohydrates are also essential for animals because they fuel the body, aid digestion, and even impact fertility. In addition, intestinal bacteria can be influenced by the presence of fiber in your pet's diet.

Fiber should be fermentable for maximum benefit to your pet. Wheat, rice, and vegetables are all excellent sources of fermentable fiber. However, younger dogs and cats shouldn't eat high-fiber foods. Due to their high energy requirements, a diet higher in fat and protein is generally recommended.

The diet we give our pets is the only source of nutrients for our canine and feline companions.

A pet can get all the nutrients from a well-balanced diet in protein, fat, and carbohydrates. Except in cases where your vet recommends otherwise, vitamin supplements are usually unnecessary. Taking in too many vitamins has adverse effects on health.

Overconsumption of vitamin A, for instance, has been linked to bone fragility and joint pain. Furthermore, excessive vitamin D intake has been linked to increased bone density and kidney issues.

Do keep clean water available for your pet. They get some of the water they need from what they eat, but not all of it. Also, dogs and cats drink at different rates. Because dogs drink more water when they're doing strenuous activities, you should provide it for them as they play.

The quantity of H₂O a dog drinks can double on hot days.

It's easy to see if your pet is too heavy.

Do they have a waist, defined by a dip between their ribcage and thighs, when viewed from the side and the top? Alternatively, try the touch test below: Rub your pet's spine and ribs with your hand.

Can you detect the skeleton without making direct contact? If not, your pet dog or cat may be overweight. You can help your pet shed unwanted pounds by getting them into a regular exercise routine.

Your veterinarian can help you develop a strategy to get your pet moving more. For example, a cat might enjoy more daytime play if this is the case. That could mean taking him on longer walks during the day or to the dog park for some vigorous exercise.



Factors that Affect Animal Nutrition

Both the length and quality of your pet's life can benefit from proper nutrition. In addition, proper nutrition has been shown to improve health and reduce disease in all species.

A healthy diet is essential for various reasons, including disease prevention and management. Particularly beneficial have been foods developed for pets with chronic kidney diseases, such as dogs and cats. Both pet owners and veterinarians need to consider the animal, its diet, feeding management, and environmental factors.

Animal-Specific Factors

Things like the animal's age, physiological condition, and level of activity are examples of species-specific considerations. Pets in this situation should only be allowed to eat specially formulated foods to meet their condition's dietary needs.

Diet-Specific Factors

Diet-specific factors include the safety and appropriateness of the diet fed to a specific animal. Diet-induced disorders are characterized by issues traced back to dietary choices (e.g., adulteration, spoilage, and nutrient imbalances). Sometimes, a vet will recommend a specific diet to patients suffering from these conditions.

Environmental Considerations and Feed Management

There are environmental considerations, such as the amount of space and the quality of the environment, and feeding considerations, such as how often, when, where, and how your pet is fed. Excessive use of treats, competitive eating, and reduced environmental stimulation are all examples of feeding- and environment-related issues/disorders.