**How to Choose a Pet Food**

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Most of us are asked almost every day what pet food we recommend. The guaranteed analysis on the food label provides only the barest guide as to the nutrient profile of the food, and while most pet owners care about \*ingredients\*, we (as veterinarians) are taught to concentrate more on essential \*nutrients\* animals require for continued normal functioning.

So how do you recommend a pet food? In my view, you don't-you recommend companies. And I personally want pet owners to choose from a few pet food companies, rather than one. In the recent past, taurine deficiency cardiomyopathy, aflatoxicosis, and melamine poisoning occurred because owners were loyal to one company's brand. Varying the company, not just the brand, may protect against human error that finds its way into the pet food.

So here are my criteria for recommending a food manufacturer:

1.  The company needs a track record, proving its ability to produce **consistently safe formulations, hold onto the best employees, and is using profits to improve (and not just expand) the company.**

2.  There should be a **board certified** veterinary nutritionist on staff. The only way the formulations can improve over time is if a nutritionist is constantly feeding updated knowledge into those formulations.

3.  The company philosophy fits with my clients'preferences (such as convenience, control over ingredients, or company sourcing practices) and my patients' needs.

Once we settle on a few companies, I have these additional recommendations for my clients:

 **Choose foods that carry an AAFCO feeding claim** to be complete and balanced for the appropriate life stage of your pet. Some smaller pet food companies do not produce balanced diets, and others produce pure meat diets "intended for supplemental or intermittent feeding". Nutritional deficiencies could result if either of these are fed long term.

 **Rotate between various companies** (i.e., use various flavors or lines, but also from different companies).

 **Avoid exotic ingredients** like duck, rabbit, emu, pheasant, and venison. They aren't necessary for healthy pets and we may need for them for diagnosing or treating certain conditions later. There is plenty of variety to be had with chicken, lamb, beef, pork, turkey, fish, egg and vegetarian foods. It's also easier to find organic versions of these ingredients if the client prefers.

 **Feed dogs veggies and fruits** as snacks or to beef up the amount of food in the bowl. Rather than discouraging owners from feeding table scraps, which most will do anyway, encourage them to feed the right kind of table scrap. Veggies and fruits are low in fat and may have cancer chemopreventive effects. Grapes, raisins and onions should of course be avoided. Choose all colors, including carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, bell peppers, squash, apples, melon, berries, etc.

 **Don't buy large bags of food for small animals**-food should be used up within a month, especially if it is stabilized with natural preservatives instead of chemical preservatives.

 **Avoid free feeding of cats or dogs**-most just get fat this way. Worse, the owners are usually unable to tell how much they are feeding, or whether the pet is eating normally. Getting better control of feeding times also makes hiding medications in food easier!

Some clients are interested in a 'holistic' or 'natural' diet. There being no official definition of same, the companies producing these diets interpret the terms in a variety of ways. These companies span the spectrum from those owned by major corporations with veterinary nutritionists on staff, to those that don't bother to provide complete and balanced formulations or comply with state petfood labeling laws. If the same rules indicated above are applied to the 'natural' pet foods, and as of this writing, only 1-3 can pass muster.

Seems like a lot to remember, but here is the simple version: feed balanced foods, from different companies. Give veggies and fruits instead of junky treats, and maintain a lean body weight. If the owner prefers homemade food, get the recipe balanced by a nutritionist, and stick to the plan.