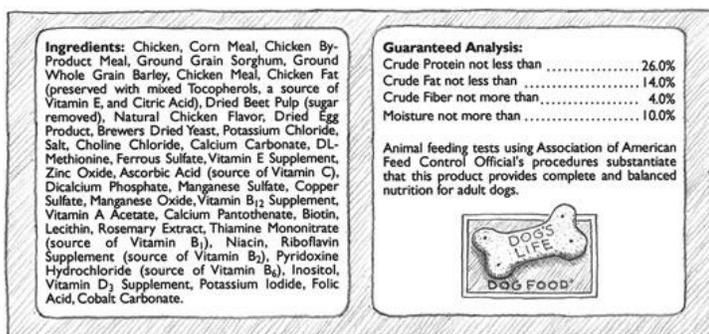




## Understanding Pet Foods

Understanding a pet food label can be a challenge. What do all those terms really mean? The better you understand them, the better your chance of deciding whether that food is one you want to feed your pet.



### Guaranteed analysis

The guaranteed analysis lists the amount of protein, fat, fiber, and moisture. Unfortunately, it doesn't list the exact amount but only minimum or maximum. It says nothing about the quality of the ingredients.

### Complete and balanced

This statement means the food meets certain standards. The food was analyzed to show it has the proper amount of certain nutrients or the company has done a feeding trial making sure the pets are healthy at the end of the trial. Feeding trials are considered better. They last 10 weeks for puppies and kittens, and 26 weeks for adult pets.

The American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) is the organization that establishes the standards. AAFCO does not regulate, test, approve, or certify pet foods. However, many states require pet food manufacturers follow AAFCO standards.

The standards are what pets need based on our current knowledge. They are adequate levels but not necessarily what is needed to prevent disease or for a long life.

### Comparing different products

You can compare the amounts of certain substances in different pet foods. To do so requires math so you are comparing the same things. The amount of moisture and fiber will skew the amount of the other ingredients. Comparing labels just won't work.

For instance, let's look at two dry cat foods. One was labeled as 30% protein and the other was 37%. You might think the second food was much higher in protein. However, when they are calculated on an energy basis (the best way to do it), the first food had 90 grams of protein per 1000 kcal and the second was 93 grams. Not as much of a difference as it first appeared.

### Ingredients

All ingredients are listed in their decreasing order by weight. This can be a little misleading because if an ingredient has a lot of water in it, it will weigh more. In addition, some similar ingredients can be listed separately lower down the list. An example of this is sweeteners in human products. You may see sugar, corn syrup, and dextrose on the label separately. However, they are all sweeteners and may have been the first ingredient if they had been lumped together. The chemical sounding names toward the end are usually added vitamins and minerals.

### Preservatives and colors

Dry foods need a preservative. It prevents fats in the food from becoming rancid. Artificial preservatives are ethoxyquin, BHA and BHT. A number of years ago, people became concerned about these preservatives. Many companies have now switched to using natural antioxidants as preservatives: mixed tocopherols (vitamin E), vitamin C, and rosemary extract. Read the label to see what is in your pet's food. It is better to use natural preservatives.

Some foods have artificial colors added. You will see a color and number on the label, such as Red 40. This is added to look more appealing to the human buying the food.



### Meat, by-products, and meal

This can be one of the most confusing parts of the label. Each ingredient has a specific meaning and it may not be what you think it is.

**Meat** is muscle tissue from a mammal. The label may also say beef or lamb. This is what you think of as meat. Poultry (chicken, turkey, or duck) is the “meat” but can also include skin and bone. Unfortunately, you don't know how much is flesh and how much is bone.

**By-products** are parts of the animal left after the meat has been removed for humans. It includes the internal organs. Some companies will list the specific ones used such as kidney, liver, etc. These can be good sources of nutrients.

By-products can also include the heads and feet of birds, and any other parts of the animal besides the flesh. It cannot include feathers, hair, horns, teeth, or hooves. **Digest** is similar except that enzymes or chemicals have digested the tissues. When the term “by-products” is used, you don't know what the source is or how nutritious it is.

**Meal** is the rendering (cooking) of tissues to remove moisture and fat. Poultry meal starts with the flesh, skin, and bones, while poultry by-product meal includes everything else except feathers. Meat meal is mammal tissue and includes everything except blood, hair, hooves, hide, manure, and stomach (with its contents). If bone is added, it is called meat and bone meal.

Meal can also come from grains after removing oil, fiber, & starch. They are not as digestible as animal ones. Meal concentrates the protein in the food. As with by-products, the quality is unknown.

The rendering process kills organisms that can cause disease. Because of this, diseased animals, ones that die for reasons besides slaughtering, or ones rejected for human food can be used in pet food. However, meal is not allowed in human food. Therefore, things that are considered unfit for humans can still be used in pet food.

### Fiber

Many people don't like fiber added to their pet's food. This is what people usually mean by “fillers”. Fiber is not considered essential for pets. However, it does provide some benefits. Fiber improves the health of the colon and controls constipation and diarrhea. Some intestinal diseases respond better to added fiber in the diet. Dogs with obesity or diabetes often respond better to a high fiber diet.

Fiber that is “fermentable” is broken down by bacteria in the intestines. The result is short-chain fatty acids that promote the growth of good bacteria as well as improve the health of cells in the colon. Moderately fermentable fiber, such as beet pulp or rice bran, is most effective.

Highly fermentable fiber, like citrus pectin and guar gum, can produce loose stools or excess gas if in large amounts. Poorly fermentable fibers, like cellulose and wheat bran, provide bulk and help with constipation.

Beet pulp is often used and is often misunderstood. Beet pulp is the by-product after sugar is removed from sugar beets. It has no color and there is no sugar in it. It is moderately fermentable so will improve the health of the intestines. Some people are opposed to the use of beet pulp; however, most of the objections are not based on science or fact.



### **Summary**

Many companies do a balancing act between high quality food and making the food affordable. You need to decide what ingredients are important and how much you are willing to pay. When it comes to pet food, cost is usually an indicator of the quality of the food. Inexpensive food is often poorly digested. Pets may survive on it, but it often lacks the best nutrition for a long and healthy life.