

# Decoding food labels

---

## “What’s Really Important?” and “What is Advertising Fluff?”

There are literally 100's of dog and cat foods on the market now. According to the Pet Food Institute, in 2008 pet food sales in the United States was \$17 billion with another \$1.3 billion in products exported overseas. With over 146 million dogs and cats living in American households, pet food sales have become very competitive. Manufacturers create very beautiful packaging and use advertising to make their product as unique as possible. This leads to high level of confusion for our pet owners who are just trying to feed the best food possible for the budget that they can afford.



All pet foods and treats are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The goal of the FDA is to ensure that ingredients are safe and have an appropriate function in the food. FDA also has rules for the correct labeling of the pet food including the product name, net quantity, manufacturer or distributor information, and listing of ingredients based on weight from most to least. FDA does not regulate or have rules regarding the use of "natural, holistic, organic, gourmet, human-grade, premium, super premium, or ultra premium" as part of the product name. In conjunction with FDA, the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) provides oversight on nutritional requirements and product testing with more specific regulations regarding product name, guaranteed analysis, nutritional adequacy statements, feeding directions, and caloric statements.

Here is a brief synopsis of what is the true meaning behind some of the words.

- Meat - refers to the clean flesh, limited to striated muscle associated with the skeleton, tongue, diaphragm, heart, esophagus with or without the overlying fat and portions of skin, connective tissue, nerve and blood vessels, "meat" still contains significant amount of water in the tissues, approximately 75% water remains
- Meat Meal - refers to the rendered product from mammal tissues **excluding** added blood, hair, hoof, horn, hide, and intestinal contents, "meals" tend to be a more concentrated form of protein because the water has already been removed (only 10% remains) and can contain more minerals than the "meat" products
- Poultry - refers to the clean combination of flesh and skin with or without the bone, **excluding** feathers, heads, feet, and entrails.
- Poultry Meal - refers to the dry rendered poultry products with the same exclusions
- By-products - refers to internal organs not traditionally sold to American consumers, such as liver, lungs, kidneys, etc. Bones and undeveloped poultry eggs may also be included as a "by-product"
- Fish - actually there is no AAFCO definition for "fish"
- Fish Meal - refers to the clean dried ground tissue of undecomposed whole fish or fish cuttings
- Flavor - does not indicate that a specific percentage of the "flavoring" has been added to the diet but rather an amount in sufficient enough quantity that can be detected, sometimes this is a "stock" or "broth" or an animal "digest" which are materials treated with heat, enzymes and/or acids to concentrate the natural flavor. Artificial flavors are rarely used in pet foods despite competitors claims to differentiate their product line by indicating that they "do not use artificial flavors."

The order of the listing of ingredients on the packaging is based on the pre-manufacturing weight. This is most significant for dry kibble analysis, less so for the canned products. If a "meat" is listed (and promoted) as the first ingredient, consideration must be made that that ingredient contains 70-75% water weight and its actual protein contribution to the diet may be significantly lower when the dry kibble is manufactured. Pet food manufacturers sometimes separate out the

different components of grains into "flours" "ground products" and "middlings" to give the impression that the grain is a lesser percentage of the total diet. "Grain-free" diets substitute other vegetable "starches" important for consolidating the kibble pieces and are should not automatically be considered a "low-carbohydrate" diet.

The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center Board Certified Nutritionists write the following on their website regarding corn as a key grain ingredient. "In recent years corn has been described as a low quality "filler" in pet foods, and implicated as the culprit in pets with food allergies (typically by competitor food companies). In reality, corn provides a nutritious, affordable source of carbohydrate for energy, essential amino and fatty acids for healthy skin, coat and immune system function, and a variety of other nutrients. These nutrients are released during the manufacturing process, and are easily absorbed and utilized when included in complete diets..... With regard to corn as an allergen, few veterinarians or veterinary nutritionists believe that corn is a highly allergic food. They often cite the fact that other common ingredients, like wheat, dairy, soy, and beef, are much more frequently associated with food allergies. Moreover, we must remember that the problem in patients with allergies is with the immune system of the individual rather than with any external substance, which has no effect on those with healthy immune systems. For those pets that are proven to be sensitive to ingredients in foods through feeding elimination trails, the ingredient should obviously be avoided, but otherwise it remains a cost-efficient, quality nutrient source for pet foods."



AAFCO creates guidelines for nutritional adequacy referred to as the Dog or Cat Food Nutrient Profiles. Diets advertised as "complete, balanced, 100% nutritious" have been approved by AAFCO by one of 2 standards. The first way companies can bring a product to market is by far the cheapest and easiest for a product to be approved. The diet is simply formulated to provide levels of nutrients that meet the established profiles. These diets carry the words on the package "(Product name) is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Food Nutrient Profiles." The alternative way to get product approval is to actually perform a feeding trial following the strict guidelines established by AAFCO. These pet foods will have the words "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that (Product name) provides complete and balanced nutrition (for specific life stage)." Companies are allowed the flexibility of only perform a feeding trial on the "lead" diet and then making inferences for the other diets in the product family.



Pet Foods can also carry labels regarding the age or reproduction category that a product is best suited for. An "all life stages diet" is formulated to meet the higher caloric needs for "growth and reproduction" and may have too many calories for the energy needs of the majority of house pets. "Maintenance" diets are created for adult, non-reproducing dogs or cats of average activity. "Senior" pets or "Large Breed Pets" do not have independent established nutrient profiles established by AAFCO at this time. Officially these diets meet the nutrient profiles of a "maintenance" diet.

The growing number of products available to consumers can be very overwhelming. Advertisements can be very powerful and persuasive at indicating that one food is clearly better than another. Veterinarians and their staff daily see patients on a variety of different diets and have the opportunity to form opinions as to what foods seem to be associated with the best overall health. During your pet's annual examination ask your veterinary staff questions about diet and health. You may be amazed at how much they do actually know about nutrition versus the pet food retailers.

Information for this article was compiled from <http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/default.htm> and <http://vet.osu.edu/vmc/nutrition-support-service>. If you have any questions or would like more information about food labels please call us at (920) 668-6212 or email us at [info@cgvet.com](mailto:info@cgvet.com).