

Making Sense of Pet Food Labels

Pet Column for the week of
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In the past several years, the number of pet foods available has increased dramatically. With a variety of products lining the shelves at grocery stores, consumers are finding it very difficult to choose the right one. Reading the labels can make the situation even more confusing because they contain marketing hype along with important information about the food.

Dr. Allan Paul, a veterinary professor who teaches small animal nutrition at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine, says, "To the public, pet food labels can often be misleading. A basic understanding of how pet food labels work can help consumers make an educated decision about the food that they are buying for their pet."

A pet food label has two main parts: the information panel and the main display panel. The main display panel is used to make the product look attractive to the customer. It must include a product name that identifies the product as a pet food, and it usually also includes a manufacturer's name or a brand name as well. The product name is subject to the Association of American Feed Control Officials

(AAFCO) regulations on the statement of feed ingredients. "This is where the wording on the pet food can get confusing," says Dr. Paul. "For instance, if the product name includes the word 'beef,' then it must contain at least 70 percent beef, but if the product name includes the words 'beef dinner,' 'beef platter,' or 'beef entrée,' then the food need contain only 10 percent beef. The term 'with beef,' used to highlight an ingredient, means the product contains at least 3 percent of that ingredient, and a product label 'beef flavor' needs only a recognizable beef flavor, and beef can comprise less than 1 percent of the total ingredients."

In addition to the product name, the main display panel may also include a nutrition claim, which must be substantiated by a nutrition adequacy statement located on the information panel. Nutrition adequacy claims can be substantiated either by meeting the AAFCO nutrient profile or by completing an AAFCO feeding trial.

Dr. Paul says, "One of the best ways to ensure that you are buying a food that is truly meeting the nutritional requirements of your pet is to look for a statement on the bag that says that the product successfully passed AAFCO feeding trials. These trials require that concrete data-including data on weight maintenance and blood work-be collected from animals that are put on the diet for an extended period: 10 months for growth formulas and 6 months for adult formulas. This ensures that the food has no nutritional deficiencies or excesses that could be detrimental to your pet in the long run."

The information panel must include an ingredient statement, which lists ingredients in descending order by weight. This can be useful, but it does not tell the buyer either the quality of the

ingredients or their nutritional value. It can be misleading because although meat may be listed first, it may be the heaviest ingredient only because of its high moisture content.

The information panel must also include a guaranteed analysis, which contains percentages of crude protein, crude fat, crude fiber, and moisture found in the product. "This is another area where the label can be misleading," says Dr. Paul. "The guaranteed analysis may say that the product contains a certain percentage of protein, but that does not say anything about its quality or digestibility. For instance, you cannot fulfill your nutritional protein requirement by eating an old leather shoe, even though the shoe probably has a high protein content.

"Reading all of this may make you question your pet food selection, but before you switch your pet to another food, ask yourself if you really need to change. Many pet owners decide to change pet foods because they think that while their pet food is adequate, another brand is better.

"In my experience, one of the best indicators of the quality of a pet food is how well an animal thrives on that food," says Dr. Paul. "If your animal seems to be doing well, then changing the food can often have more drawbacks than benefits. Pets are sensitive to changes in diet and any change, especially a sudden one, can bring about gastrointestinal upset. If you decide to change foods do it gradually, and choose a food wisely by reading the label carefully."

If you have any further questions about pet nutrition or reading pet food labels, please consult your local veterinarian.