

Feeding Your Pet

The most common question we get now is how to choose the appropriate diet and type of diet that someone's pet should eat. There is a lot of confusing and conflicting information out there and the internet only adds to the confusion that most people have. This handout is designed to help you navigate through the many choices you have and to allow you to make the decision which is best for your pet.



The first rule is that, in general, the best foods you will find will be those offered at Veterinary Hospitals. We carry **Science Diet** for a variety of reasons, but most importantly, we believe it is an excellent diet. If we had the space we would also carry **Eukanuba** foods and **Royal Canin** diets as well. These three companies know nutrition inside and out. This knowledge allows them to make excellent foods for healthy dogs and cats, and it allows them to create specialized Veterinary Prescription foods which are for animals with specific dietary needs that ordinary foods do not have. Veterinary Prescription diets have saved the lives of hundreds of our patients and have extended the lives of hundreds more.

Pet stores also offer a number of excellent foods. In general their quality is just slightly below those of veterinary diets. Grocery stores come next, with price clubs and places like Wal-Mart bringing up the rear. These general rules can be very helpful, but there are exceptions. **Iams** foods used to be sold only in pet stores, but when they made it available in grocery stores, they continued to be high quality.

How Dogs and Cats Extract nutrition

To better understand some of the concepts that this handout addresses later on, it is important to understand some basic concepts involving the digestion of food, and the utilization of nutrition. When food is eaten, the stomach and the intestines take that food and break it down into tiny particles which consist only of a few molecules each. The nutrition cannot be absorbed by the intestine unless the food is broken down into these tiny subunits. So when you are thinking about nutrition, you have to understand that getting the right subunits is very important. Also the quality of those nutrients becomes important as well. If a food contains a lot of stuff that cannot be broken down properly in the intestine, it just gets pooped out. This is why one food may tell you to feed 1 cup each day while another may tell you to feed 2 cups. The second food may be cheaper, but you'll use it up twice as fast.

The list of ingredients and the guaranteed analysis can be very misleading as well. It's a helpful guideline, but it doesn't necessarily indicate a food's quality. You can easily make up the RDA (Recommended Daily Allowance) requirements for an adult dog by processing motor oil, and old tires into a dog food. The RDA analysis will read that your new food has the right amounts of protein and carbohydrates and minerals, but obviously these are not healthy ingredients for any animal to eat!

A much better indicator is the **AAFCO Statement**. This statement declares that the food in the bag you have just bought has been tested and fed over long periods of time to animals and is a healthy and balanced diet. Any food worth eating should have that statement on the bag.

Using these guidelines, let's address some of the "trendy" topics in nutrition over the past few years.

Raw Diets

Many people believe that raw diets are the best way to duplicate the diets that dogs and cats were "created" to eat. Yes I used "created" in that manner because for some people this opinion comes with a certain degree of religious fervor.

MYTH “Dogs are descended from wolves and since wolves eat raw meat, dogs should too. Cooking the meat only destroys nutrients that the dogs need”

FACT: Yes it is true that wolves eat raw meat, but raw meat is loaded with parasites and bacteria that makes animals sick and causes repeated bouts of diarrhea. At one time mankind didn't cook their meat either, and were all 4 feet tall when they died at the ripe old age of 29. Cooking food allowed for many revolutions. Healthier people who lived longer lives with less disease. Cooking and preserving of food helped people prepare for long journeys at sea. Without these innovations Columbus could not have made it to America.

Dogs and cats fed raw diets have diarrhea bouts multiple times every year. These can progress into a potentially life threatening gastrointestinal infection.

In addition, a wolf eats not only the meat off of their prey, they eat the bones, the lungs, the fat, the skin...everything. Most people who swear that raw diets are “natural” are not doing it properly if they leave out the other important parts of the body that a wild animal eats.

MYTH: “Cooking destroys enzymes that animals need to help digest properly”

FACT: All the enzymes that a dog or cat needs to digest food are produced by their own body. Enzymes are massive structures and cannot be absorbed through the intestinal wall without being broken down into those tiny subunits. Then those tiny subunits are reassembled into whatever structure that the body needs to produce. Nutrition is almost entirely about eating the right combination of foods to get the proper ratio of subunits into the body, not about where those subunits originated from. Any “enzyme” that a dog or cat eats is not utilized as that particular enzyme, instead it is broken down into these subunits

MYTH: “Corn in dog and cat food is bad because everybody knows that corn isn't digestible! When I eat corn it just goes right through me!”

FACT: Corn is an excellent source of the amino acid Lysine. Lysine is a critical amino acid for everyone to have in abundance in their diet. We often supplement cats with lysine to help booster their immune system.

BOTTOM LINE: You wouldn't eat a raw chicken breast. You know how risky it is. Why pass that risk on to your pet?

Food Allergy

Dogs and cats can develop allergies to key ingredients in their foods. Usually the allergy is either to the protein source in the food or the carbohydrate source in the food. The most common food allergies that dogs and cats experience are to beef, chicken, barley and wheat.. Long time exposure to any protein or complex carbohydrate can turn a dog allergic to that substance. (If the dog has a predisposition to be allergic to their food)

The vast majority of dogs and cats can safely eat any food that they are given. Food allergy is must less common than people believe. If a dog or cat has a food allergy the primary symptom of that allergy is itchy skin. (Not diarrhea) If a dog or cat has food allergy, switching them off of the food that they are allergic to may not cause the itchiness to subside for up to three months.

MYTH: “Lamb and rice is a good food for allergic dogs. Everyone says so”

FACT: That was true, in 1995. Back then veterinarians used lamb and rice diets as our primary diet for allergic dogs. When word got out, many food manufacturers started making “sensitive skin” diets for dogs that contained Lamb and rice as the primary ingredients. Once the use of those two diets became widespread, lamb and rice-based diets lost their usefulness, because so many pets had been exposed to them already. Veterinary hypoallergenic diets now consist of weird ingredients, like whitefish and potato, kangaroo and oats or duck and sweet potato.

MYTH: “Why spend extra for a fancy Veterinary diet for allergic dogs when I can get hypoallergenic buffalo or venison based diets at the pet store?”

FACT: Those diets do not claim to be hypoallergenic. They may be hypoallergenic by coincidence, but the level of precision required to make a true hypoallergenic diet goes beyond what most over-the-counter foods are willing to do. (It costs MONEY). The easiest example of this is that all diets need a separate source of calcium. Meat alone is calcium deficient. Calcium comes from bone meal. Almost all bone meal comes from beef bones or chicken bones. Those fancy venison based diets probably has bone meal from beef or chicken in it, so functionally you’re still exposing your dog to those allergen sources as well. Even worse, one batch of that food may have bone meal from chicken, while the next may have bone meal from beef.

If your veterinarian believes that your dog or cat has a food allergy, you need to follow their program. You need to have diligence about chew toys, and treats, and table food and heartworm preventative (**Heartguard** has BEEF) to make sure everything goes in a manner that is helpful and precise.

At Swan Corner we prefer to use the **Hill’s Z/D prescription diets**. They are NON-allergenic (Not just hypoallergenic). Any special protein we pick for an allergic dog’s food has the potential for causing allergies itself 6 months later. Z/D solves that problem by pre-processing the food into those tiny subunits that the intestine can readily absorb. Those particles are so small that the dog’s immune system cannot detect what protein source they came from, therefore the original protein source is irrelevant. Dogs successfully transitioned to Z/D can stay on it safely for the rest of their lives.

Organic Foods

Organic foods contain natural protein and vegetable sources, grown without insecticides and hormones. The belief is that this produces a healthier food. For the most part, with most animals, this is true. However, since “organic” is their main focus, they may not pay attention to some of the other complicated nutritional aspects of dog and cat foods, and this lack of attention has gotten many of our patients into trouble.

Approximately 10% of cats, and 4% of dogs have a genetic predisposition toward making crystals in their urine. Those crystals are mostly made of magnesium and form in a urine whose pH is over 7.0 (There are other crystals as well, but this type is most prevalent). Recently we have had a number of patients who were given **California Natural** food and **Trader Joe’s** food, who developed these crystals. The ingredients of these foods contain elements which DO NOT prevent the formation of these crystals.

Similarly **Beneful Dog Food** and **Purina Indoor Cat Formula** (Not organic foods) have caused crystals in our sensitive patients. The image of an indoor cat eating grass and a dog eating beef stew loaded with veggies may be quaint, and the advertisement may be appealing, but in the wrong pet it can be fatal.

People who feed organic foods think they are doing the best for their pet. But, the makers of these foods have decided that they do not want to make their foods safe for pets with this predisposition. That doesn’t make these foods bad foods (Check for the **AAFCO statement!**), but it means that selecting the proper and safe food for your pet is not a simple process. A food like **Hill’s Science Diet** or **Eukanuba** may not be organic, but in the right animal it can save them tremendous pain and suffering, and in certain situations, can save their life.

Science Diet, Eukanuba and Royal Canin

MYTH: “**Science Diet** is crap! The only reason veterinarians sell it is because they were brainwashed in school into loving it, and they get all these kickbacks from the company! Plus it has corn in it! No one can digest corn! Look at all those preservatives! They have scary names!”

FACT: There are certain medical conditions that can only be treated with special diets. Veterinarians use **Science Diet** (And other Prescription foods) in the same way that they use a pill, as medicine. The food takes up too much space, the profit margin is tiny. But it is a critical part of the care of many animals. That’s the bottom line.

Over the past 90 years the premium pet food companies have worked to understand canine and feline nutrition. No other companies understand nutrition the way that these companies do. They make an excellent product, without any agenda other than to make healthy pets. Anyone who tells you anything else, is probably selling something.