

Holistic = Wholistic

By Elizabeth Chandler

“What does *holistic* mean?” “What is the difference between *holistic*, *organic*, and *natural*”? These questions are now being asked by pet owners who are diving headfirst into the waters of holistic pet food in the wake of the recent pet food recall. Frantic pet owners, who never questioned the ingredients in their food before, are now looking for safe alternatives to the tainted commercial food. Before the pet food recall, consumers made a lot of assumptions about pet food, such as, “If the commercials say the food is great for my dog, then it must be true” or “if it is expensive, it must be a good food.” By not having awareness of the ingredients in our pet’s food, we gave the responsibility for their nutrition to the commercial pet food companies. Now, those assumptions are being questioned as pet owners take back responsibility for their pet’s nutrition and that is a very good thing for the health of our beloved pets.

Let’s start with clarifying the definitions. Holistic, organic, and natural are NOT created equal. *Natural* means absolutely nothing; there is no regulation of the term *natural*, but it is frequently used in product labeling by companies who are hopeful that consumers will assume (there’s that word again!) whatever that adjective is referring to is a good thing for them or their pets. Cancer is a natural process, albeit one that has gone awry, so *natural* doesn’t necessarily mean good or healthy. By-products are natural, but that doesn’t mean our pets should be eating them. The healthfulness of products labeled *natural* should be questioned.

Organic is a little easier to define, because there are requirements that must be met before a product can be certified as *organic*. But, again, buyer beware; just because the word *organic* is part of the product name or on the label does not mean the product is, in fact, organic. The ploy of putting the word *organic* in the product name when the product is not organic is commonly used. Read the ingredients and check for organic certification by a bona fide certifying organization.

Finally, *Holistic* has a huge range of meanings, but the good news is that it is rarely used in deceptive product labeling or advertising. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *Holistic* as follows: 1. Of or relating to holism. 2.a. Emphasizing the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts. 2.b. Concerned with wholes rather than analysis or separation into parts: *holistic medicine; holistic ecology*. Simply put, the best way to think of *Holistic* is to think of it as *Wholistic*, i.e., taking into consideration the whole being.

Now that we’ve covered the definitions, let’s look at how to apply this new-found knowledge. When reading the label of a dry (kibble), canned, or even raw dog or cat food, the first three ingredients are the primary ingredients in the product. If any of the first three ingredients is corn meal, corn gluten, or wheat gluten, that means the product is devoid of nutrition that is evolutionarily in-line with your pet’s health needs. Corn meal, corn gluten, and wheat gluten are fillers and, not only are absolutely useless to your pet’s digestive processes, they are, in fact, potential killers of your pet because dogs and cats are *not* designed to be able to process these fillers.

From an evolutionary perspective, dogs and cats are designed to eat meat (preferably raw, which contains live enzymes very similar to those they would get if taking down prey in the wild), cooked vegetables (dogs and cats do not have the ability to breakdown the cell walls of raw vegetables), and fresh fruit. Anything else in your dog or cat’s diet is, at the very least, nutritionally useless and, at worst, a potential contributor to your pet’s early demise through disease and organ failure.

Tainted wheat gluten was the culprit in the pet food recall, so buying holistic food for your pet (true holistic food should not contain wheat gluten) would ensure elimination of that risk factor.

However, the deeper problem with the tainted pet food shed light on the functionality and safety of the entire pet food industry; that is, most producers out-source the packaging and/or manufacturing of their product, thereby really only serving as a name and not a bona fide producer. The problematic wheat gluten was from China, where many products are purchased for the sake of making it cheap enough to appeal to consumers. An educated consumer not only has to read the label; they have to investigate the processes of the company that makes the product. In America, we have given up responsibility for products we consume for many, many years and have blindly accepted whatever package labeling and advertising tells us to accept. We now must take responsibility for what happened in the pet food recall and prevent it from happening again by investigating and questioning, rather than taking producer's claims at face value or buying into their advertising claims.

So, from a *holistic* (i.e., whole pet) perspective, you should make sure your pet has meat as two or three of the top three ingredients in their food. Also, it is a good idea to mix up your pet's exposure to different types of meat, fruits, and vegetables (assuming there are no allergies to be concerned about). A great way to do that is to serve kibble one meal, canned the next, and raw the next, or any arrangement of that type of variability. And you can even cook up some fresh veggies to toss in their food. Because even the best kibble, canned, or even raw food is still a *processed* product, it is also wise to supplement your pet's diet with digestive enzymes, vitamins, and essential fatty acids. As your pet ages, you'll want to add Glucosamine and MSM *before* joint problems present themselves. You should also provide a chew item in your pet's diet to help keep their teeth clean. Some options for this are beef tendons, cow ears, or raw bones (NOT rawhide).

Holistic care for your pet also naturally extends to veterinary care. While conventional veterinary medicine can often meet many of your pet's needs, holistic veterinarians are trained in conventional care as well as having strong backgrounds in nutrition, herbs and homeopathics, acupuncture, and a host of additional modalities that will benefit your pet over time. If your pet develops an illness, the conventional veterinarian approach is often a band-aid type of approach (i.e., treat the symptoms); whereas the holistic veterinarian recognizes that the illness happened for a reason and works to resolve that reason and support your pet's whole being in the process. Even if your pet is young and not ill or health-challenged, starting them out with holistic veterinary care before illness strikes will likely extend their life while also helping to ensure quality of life in the process.

Now is the time for all of us to take responsibility for what we are putting in and on our pet's bodies. We can sit and point fingers and play the blame game all we want, but in the end, no matter what they are doing in China or anywhere else in the pet food production industry, it is *our* responsibility to know what we are feeding our pets.