

Now Let's Talk Nutrition!



Read The Labels!

~Jennifer Hite, DVM

When news of the pet food recalls was first released about two years ago, it seemed every pet owner took a deep breath and then scoured the TV news, newspaper, and internet for more information. Was the food they used on the list? If not, would it be added soon? If so, was their pet okay? And for those whose pets got sick, would they survive?

After the pet food crisis was “under control”, more questions appeared. The main question was “*what food is safe to feed my pet?*” That question is still unanswered for many pet owners.

Pets on low quality diets may have dry skin and hair, be under or overweight, have diarrhea or excessive amounts of stool, and are more prone to skin infections. What your pet eats affects how well his or her immune system works. What your pet eats affects his or her entire body!

The first and best recommendation I can make is to talk to your veterinarian. A nutritional consultation will help determine the best food for your pet. The food that is best for your pet may be a home cooked diet, a prescription diet, or a commercial diet and canned, moist, or dry depending on their health status, age, lifestyle, and breed.

If a commercial diet is appropriate for your pet, get ready to wade through your options. First, pick a brand of food that you can trust. Your veterinarian should be able to recommend a brand of food that is high quality and well balanced. Some factors your veterinarian takes into account when choosing a brand of food to recommend include quality of ingredients, percentages of ingredients (*sources of protein, etc*), use of dyes, and use of natural preservatives.

So you went to the store and read the pet food package. Still confused? The majority of the package is designed to sell the food, not educate you. Try to look past the perfectly adorable pet on the front and

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look at the ingredient list. The ingredients are listed by weight starting with the highest. Typically the first ingredient is corn, wheat, soy, or more rarely, a meat source. Meats are the best protein source for dogs and cats. Although typically more expensive, diets with meat as the primary protein source (*and first ingredient listed*) will require your pet to eat less to meet his/her needs.

Next comes how to tell how much meat is there and where the meat came from. Meat sources range from “*human-grade*” food to rendered “*left-overs*”. **MEATS**, such as beef, lamb, and duck refers to parts such as muscle, heart, and tongue. **MEAT BY-PRODUCTS** refer to other parts including other organs, bone, and fat. **MEAT BY-PRODUCT MEAL** is meat that has been rendered and ground into meal. To clarify, by-products (*without the meat*) are non-human grade proteins from the animal carcass and may not contribute to the usable nutrition in the food (*hooves, hair, etc*). The better quality foods will list the ingredients more specifically and will list



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FYI

What is BHA, BHT, and Ethoxyquin?

BHA, BHT, and Ethoxyquin are potentially toxic artificial preservatives and are included in some pet food brands.

In general, foods will spoil without some form of temperature control or preservatives. BHA, BHT, and ethoxyquin are chemical antioxidants designed to extend the shelf life and reduce fat spoilage (*rancidity*) of pet foods and pet treats. Chemical additives and artificial preservatives such as BHA, BHT, and ethoxyquin may cause dry skin, allergic reactions, dental disease, and poor health, as well as stimulate adverse effects on liver and kidney functions.

Specifically, BHA, short for Butylated Hydroxyanisole, and BHT, Butylated Hydroxytoluene, are both artificial preservatives added to oils to slow down deterioration. BHA and BHT (*as well as ethoxyquin*) are used in numerous pet food brands, including both “premium-grade” brands like Science Diet (*even their prescription diet product line*) and lower-grade brands like Alpo and Pedigree, to replace vitamin E, which is removed during oil processing. Studies have shown that BHA and BHT promote liver disease and other medical problems.

Ethoxyquin is a chemical preservative – and possible carcinogenic – regulated by the FDA (*U.S. Food and Drug Administration*) as a pesticide. While ethoxyquin cannot be used in human foods, it continues to be used in many pet food brands. Ethoxyquin has been found to promote kidney carcinogenesis and significantly increase the incidence of stomach tumors and enhanced bladder carcinogenesis, according to several studies, including a recent one by The Department of Pathology, Nagoya City University Medical School, Japan.

The FDA currently allows only a trace amount of ethoxyquin residue (.5 to 5 ppm) in human consumed foods, yet it allows high amounts (150 ppm) to be used in pet food and livestock feeds. Of note, in 1997, the FDA’s Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) made a request to manufacturers of ethoxyquin and the pet food industry to voluntarily lower ethoxyquin residue in pet foods to 75 parts per million (ppm). To date, there is still no mandatory requirement to meet the voluntary request.

Note: Rather than listing it as an ingredient on the packaging, some dog food manufacturers simply print “E” to represent ethoxyquin.

Did You Know?: Under a typical pet food diet, the average dog (44 lbs) can consume 26 lbs of preservatives a year!

the animal the meat products are derived from.

So you know where the meat came from, how much is in the package of food you are about to purchase? There are standards for naming food that helps determine how much meat is in the pet food. We will use beef in the examples. “**Beef for dogs**” must contain 70% beef. “**Beef Dinner**” must contain 25% beef. “**With Beef**” must contain 3% beef. “**With Beef Flavor**” only means the flavor is detectable and there doesn’t have to be any meat present at all.

Now go back to the ingredient list. Near the end of the list are the dyes and preservatives. An important thing to realize is that your pet does not care if his/her food is red, yellow, or green but you should. These dyes are not only unnecessary but are also one of the ingredients in pet food that is associated with food allergies. If at all possible, avoid the dyes. The most common artificial antioxidants used in pet foods are ethoxyquin, butylated hydroxytoluene (**BHT**), and butylated hydroxyanisole (**BHA**). Common natural antioxidants include tocopherols (**Vitamin E**), ascorbic acid (**Vitamin C**), citric acid, brine, and rosemary. There is limited information about long term effects of artificial antioxidants. In my opinion natural vitamins and antioxidants are less likely to harm your pet than man-made chemicals.

If you choose to use a pet food containing natural preservatives, remember that they cannot extend shelf life as long as the artificial preservatives can. Consider buying the food in smaller amounts, to make sure that it is used up before it loses its freshness or nutritional value. Also look for foods with a ‘best if used by’ date stamped on them and consider this an expiration date.

Make an appointment to talk with your veterinarian about your pet’s diet. Once you have found the perfect food for your pet, go read the label on the treats you have in the pantry. Better yet, just go to the produce section of the supermarket. Carrots, frozen green beans, and other vegetables make tasty and nutritious snacks for your pet and for you.