

UNDERSTANDING PET FOOD LABELS

By Val Clows

When you see big colorful letters on the bag or can of pet food that says “Lamb and Rice” you assume that the food is made of lamb and rice. Did you know that it might only be 3% lamb? Did you stop to wonder what the other 97% is? To make informed decisions you must read the label.

The following chart has been prepared to help you score any dog or cat food for overall quality, nutrition and digestibility. Remember that ingredients by law, must be listed in descending order by weight. Dogs and cats both require a meat based diet due to their genetic foundation so quality meat sources should be at the very beginning of the list. Digestibility can be easily determined by monitoring the amount of stool produced. If the quantity produced is equal to or greater than the amount of food eaten the digestibility of the product can be considered poor. Food that is easily digested should produce stool quantities that approach 25% of the amount of food eaten.

SCORING DIRECTIONS: Add the assigned points to the first food item in each of the five major categories: Protein, Carbohydrates, Fats, Preservatives and Vitamins/minerals. Add any bonus points to this score. The maximum score achievable is 100 including bonus points. A score of 60-80 indicates a high quality, healthy food. The lower the total score the lower the food quality. Simply put, the healthier the food, the healthier the pet.

PROTEIN - Protein is composed of amino acids which are essential for health and organ function. Meat should be the main protein source to ensure a healthy diet for your pet.

Points	Listed as Actual	Description/Benefits and Dangers
20	Lamb, chicken, turkey, beef, Fish, venison, rabbit, duck....	Fresh meat, clean flesh and muscle meat
15	Lambmeal, chicken meal	Same as above except it has been cooked dried and ground before use
10	Meatmeal, animal meal	Comes from unidentified meat sources including dead and dying animals. May include diseased, cancerous animals that have been rejected for human consumption
10	Meat and bone meal	Same as above with ground bone added.
5	Meat by-products or meal	Includes non-specific unidentified parts including beaks, feathers, feces hair and roadkill.
5	Animal digest, liver digest	Chemically or enzymatically digested animal tissues including the unidentified parts that are listed above.
5	Beef, chickenby products	Contain parts of the specified animal but in unidentified parts as listed above.

CARBOHYDRATES - Provides incomplete proteins, vitamins and minerals. A diet that is high in grains is difficult for a dog to digest and many nutrients are lost. Grains frequently contain pesticide residues and agricultural chemicals and frequently trigger allergic reactions.

Points	Listed as Actual	Description/Benefits and Dangers
20	Brown rice, barley, millet, oats, Rye, quinoa, amaranth	Nutrient dense, unprocessed whole grains.
20	Sweet potatoes	High quality source of carbohydrates and fiber. Excellent source of nutrition, very rich in carotenes, potassium, calcium and Vit. C.
10	White rice, brewers rice	Lower quality, nutrient deficient processed grains.
10	White potatoes, Pasta	Used as a filler. Very starchy and difficult to digest.
5	Corn and wheat	Difficult to digest. Among the most common allergens our pets react to. Frequently contaminated with agricultural chemicals, molds and fungus.
1	Rice gluten, peanut hulls, middlings, corn gluten hulls, rice bran	Fragments of whole grains and floor sweepings are frequently contaminated. Used primarily as filler with no redeeming nutritive value.
1	Beet Pulp	Used as an energy source and flavoring. Provides empty "sugar" calories.
1	Soybean meal, soy flour	Dogs and cats lack the enzymes to utilize the protein in soy. This is often used as a bulk filler and can cause gas.

FATS - Fats provide energy, help to nourish healthy skin and coat and aid in the utilization of many vitamins and minerals as well as keeping the cells strong.

Points	Listed as Actual	Description/Benefits and Dangers
20	Flax, canola, fish or olive	Mono-unsaturated fats readily utilized by the body to promote health. May reduce the risk of cancer.
10	Sunflower, safflower, corn or Soybean oil	Poly-unsaturated fats containing unbalanced Omega 6 fatty acids more difficult for the body to utilize effectively.
10	Chicken Fat, Beef Fat	From a specific animal source. Provides a good source of animal fat; saturated fats.
5	Vegetable oil, Animal fat, Poultry Fat, Beef Tallow	Nonspecific source, may include recycled restaurant grease. From non-specific animal sources. May contain stored toxins from the animal source.

PRESERVATIVES - These ingredients help to stabilize the products and extend the shelf life and freshness of the foods in question.

Points	Listed as Actual	Description/Benefits and Dangers
10	None, food is freshness dated or naturally preserved with Vitamins C and E, mixed tocopherols such as DL-alpha-tocopherol or ascorbic acid	Generally stable and fresh for 3 months. Usually will remain fresh and stable for 12 months from time of manufacture.
1	BHT, BHA propyl gallate, propylene Glycol (antifreeze), lactic acid, acetic Acid, sodium nitrate, potassium Salts, potassium sorbate, calcium Propionate, sodium diacetate Ethoxyquin, MSG, Sodium meta-Bisulfate	Chemical preservatives that may or may not alter the nutritional value of the food. Most have been implicated as causing cancer.
1	Artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners	These are all added to mask an otherwise unappealing tasting food and frequently trigger allergic responses.

VITAMINS AND MINERALS - Vitamins and minerals are critical nutrients that assist proper cell function and support blood, nerve, bone, teeth and soft tissue.

Points	Listed as Actual	Description/Benefits and Dangers
10	Chelated vitamins and minerals	Readily available in a form that the body can break down to use.
1	Chemical	Difficult for the body to break down and utilize. The nutrient content may be lost.

BONUS POINT INGREDIENTS - Add any or all of these to the total base score of the above categories.

Points	Listed as Actual	Description/Benefits and Dangers
5	Digestive enzymes Protease, amylase, Lipase, sucrase, inulin Micro-organisms, Lactobacillus, acidophilus, bifidobacterium longum Probiotics.	These all help to digest food and take the strain off the pancreas or help to keep the intestinal tract healthy.
5	Vegetables and Fruit	Natural sources of various vitamins and minerals.
5	Seaweed Products	Ocean derived sea minerals. Naturally chelated, rich in trace minerals and can help support the thyroid function.
5	G.A.G.'s - Glucosamine, Chondroitin Sulfate, Shark Cartilage, Bovine Cartilage, Perna Mussel.	Naturally occurring substances that replenish and thicken the cartilage and fluid in the joints. May also strengthen tendons and muscles to support the joints. These are especially helpful for arthritic, older animals or any animal with joint, hip, knee or spinal problems.