

dog food for thought

by Tracy Werner

President, Natural Pet Market

so, you live with a carnivore

You may have heard your dog referred to as a carnivore and you're pretty sure that means 'meat eater', but you feed him carrots and apples and he just loves them. He doesn't seem to have any ill effects when he eats fruits, veggies, or rice and even his premium holistic dog food contains peas, sweet potatoes, and oats. Oh sure, he LOVES meat but that's not all he eats. He can't really be a carnivore, can he? To hopefully clear the confusion, let's define some terms that are used when referring to our canine buddies...

Carnivore - Any of various generally meat-eating mammals of the order Carnivora. Carnivores have large, sharp canine teeth and large brains, and the musculoskeletal structure of their forelimbs permits great flexibility for springing at prey. Many carnivores remain in and defend a single territory. Dogs, cats, bears, weasels, raccoons, hyenas, and (according to some classifications) seals and walruses are all carnivores. (1)

Carnivora - An order of Mammalia including the lion, tiger, wolf, bear, seal, etc. They are adapted by their structure to feed upon flesh, though some of them, as the bears, also eat vegetable food. The teeth are large and sharp, suitable for cutting flesh, and the jaws powerful. (2)

Omnivore - An organism that eats both plants and animals. (3)

What this means to me is that dogs are BEHAVIORLY omnivores but PHYSICALLY carnivores. While dogs can and do eat vegetation, their bodies are expecting and do better with a primarily meat-based diet. In following mother nature's clues, an educated dog owner feeds the body to promote health.

what dogs need

In order to perform routine metabolic processes, a dog's body needs: water, energy(calories), protein, fat, vitamins & minerals.

Abundant(bowls in multiple locations) fresh clean water should be available at all times. Dehydration is very serious and can cause issues in the digestive tract, urinary system, and respiratory distress to name just a few.

A dog's energy requirements, i.e. calorie intake, depends on a slew of factors such as age, weight, and activity level. Maintaining proper body weight during your pup's lifetime is extremely important as it can actually add years to their life and prevent the onset of age-related diseases such as arthritis. Please don't let your pet become fat.

Protein is essential to your dog's daily diet as it is necessary to increase and renew the body as well as supply important amino acids, the building blocks for structure and function. Protein is found in animal and plant ingredients but the digestibility and amount of protein in the ingredient varies greatly. Animal ingredients(meat, eggs, etc.) contain more protein by proportion than do plant ingredients(potatoes, rice ,etc.). This means that your dog will need to eat a lot less of a food that is primarily meat than one that's high in vegetable ingredients. But don't be tricked by lower cost dog foods that seem to have adequate amounts of protein from animal-based ingredients. According to the Merck Veterinary Manual, "Digestibility is less for protein ingredients of poor biologic value and for poor-quality diets. If excessive heat is used in processing, proteins can become chemically unavailable for digestion and absorption. The signs produced by protein deficiency or an improper protein to calorie ratio may include any or all of the following: weight loss, skeletal muscle atrophy, dull unkempt coat, anorexia, reproductive problems, persistent unresponsive parasitism or low-grade microbial infection, impaired protection via vaccination, rapid weight loss after injury or during disease, and failure to respond properly to treatment of injury or disease. High protein intakes per se do not cause skeletal abnormalities in dogs (including osteochondrosis in large breeds) or renal insufficiency later in life in cats."

Fat is an extremely important nutrient for your dog. It transports, stores, and helps absorb valuable vitamins, provides daily energy, and is darn tasty! Fat also provides much needed omega fatty acids like DHA for brain health and EPA which keeps inflammation in check. Animal fat is the most digestible part of their daily diet and dogs can tolerate quite a bit more than their human roommates.

A, B, D, E, Calcium, Phosphorus, etc. Yes, your dogs need vitamins and minerals just like we do, but their bodies are looking for them in different amounts. Did you know that unlike us, they don't require the addition of vitamin C, their body can make its own?! Most commercial foods have a vitamin mineral supplement added to cover the nutrients lost by using substandard raw ingredients and the traditional high heat processing. Every few years or so the government releases "Nutrient Requirements for Cats and Dogs", a compilation of nutrient research articles by the National Research Council that tells us each and every nutrient that a cat or dog needs to live. It's available for anyone to purchase for around \$350.

what dogs don't need

Dogs have no biological need for carbohydrates. Their efficient bodies can manufacture all the energy it needs from protein and fat if sufficient amounts are provided. Unless feeding a specialized raw or canned diet, modern dog owners will be feeding some level of carbohydrates in their dog's daily nosh.

what dogs can't have

Grapes, raisins, onions, chocolate, xylitol - a natural sweetener, raw potatoes and depending who you listen to, there are more to list, but these are the items that they all agree upon. Never give these items to your dogs, it could mean life or death.

what dogs shouldn't have

Forward thinking veterinarians and pet professionals are looking more and more to mother nature in also suggesting what is not appropriate in a carnivore's diet. Grains such as corn, wheat, and oats, while tasty to the dog are not biologically appropriate due to their high carbohydrate count and the lack of the digestive enzyme amylase on the dog's part in order to digest it. Cooking the heck out of them renders them digestible by the dog but they also contain the pro-inflammatory Omega-6 in higher portions than meat, veggies, and fruit. Dairy is another food group to limit in their daily rations. First, it's not natural - and I mean that dogs do not continue to drink milk after they are weaned from their mother, let alone another animal's milk :) Secondly, because of the first argument, many dogs are lactose intolerant.

health & longevity

Your choice of food is so important that it can help prevent and actually heal disease. By keeping your dog lean, feeding a species appropriate nutritionally balanced diet, supplementing where needed, and providing plenty of fresh, clean drinking water you can extend the quality of life for your best friend. Vets are routinely suggesting prescription diets to their patients because they know that nutrition can manage or heal certain illnesses. The problem typically with these diets is that they are made with inferior and highly processed ingredients preserved with chemicals shown to cause other diseases. So what if your vet suggests a commercial prescription diet for your dog? Ask her what makes this particular food therapeutic for your dog. Then you may find a more healthful, fresh diet option or a supplement program that can address the health crisis nutritionally.

how to read dog food labels

For our discussion we will simply focus on the ingredient panel where the ingredients must be listed in order of quantity by weight in the formula. The first listed ingredient, for example, simply weighs the most in the recipe. Sounds easy enough right? But wait, there are “label games” that manufacturers use to make the food LOOK like a good, healthy diet when in fact it may have too many carbs or insufficient amounts of animal protein. When a manufacturer lists chicken as the first ingredient this must be a good thing right? Well, remember that chicken is mostly water which will definitely make it weigh more. Then they might list rice, oats, and barley - these are all dried before they are put into the mix therefore do not weigh as much as the chicken, but when added together and subtracting the moisture that is lost during the processing, you end up realistically having way more grains and carbs than animal protein. On the contrary, chicken meal is defined as the fresh edible parts of the chicken with the moisture removed. Therefore seeing chicken meal as the first ingredient rather than chicken is a step in the right direction, right? Well, it could or cloud not be. It's up to you to do your research on the manufacturer of foods you choose to feed, they are not all created equal in their level of commitment to fresh, quality ingredients.

what is quality

Quality - Having or showing excellence or superiority a quality product(4)

Things that are approved for inclusion in pet foods are not necessarily the same ingredients deemed ok for us two-leggeds to eat. Meat that came to the slaughterhouse already dead from who-knows-what, sick with a large tumor, or dying from a systemic disease while not permitted in the human food chain are just fine when it comes to our animal family. Sweepings off the grain mill floor, or spent yeast that's no good in brewing anymore are ingredients routinely used by large pet food manufacturers when formulating their products. While the bag has pictures of a fresh trimmed chicken breast and whole carrots, oats, and peas what's inside the bag can be feathers, beaks, old carrot tops, and moldy oats. You know what quality means when it comes to choosing your food so with this knowledge you can apply the same principles to your dog's diet.

dog food police

There's no such thing as the dog food police, every family is different and feeding your dog should be as enjoyable for you as it is for your dog. Arm yourself with knowledge and personal research and choose the absolute best that you can afford. It will pay off in reduced vet bills and feeding costs in the long run.

real world examples



Beneful Original Dry Dog Food

Ground yellow corn, chicken by-product meal, corn gluten meal, whole wheat flour, animal fat preserved with mixed-tocopherols (form of Vitamin E), rice flour, beef, soy flour, sugar, propylene glycol, meat and bone meal, tricalcium phosphate, phosphoric acid, salt, water, animal digest, sorbic acid (a preservative), potassium chloride, dried carrots, dried peas, calcium propionate (a preservative), L-Lysine monohydrochloride, choline chloride, added color (Red 40, Yellow 5, Yellow 6, Blue 2), DL-Methionine, Vitamin E supplement, zinc sulfate, ferrous sulfate, manganese sulfate, niacin, Vitamin A supplement, calcium carbonate, copper sulfate, Vitamin B-12 supplement, calcium pantothenate, thiamine mononitrate, garlic

oil, pyridoxine hydrochloride, riboflavin supplement, Vitamin D-3 supplement, menadione sodium bisulfite complex (source of Vitamin K activity), calcium iodate, folic acid, biotin, sodium selenite. (6)

Wow - doesn't that bag look appealing? Chunks of lean, fresh meat, colorful vegetables, and one very happy healthy looking dog. Let's get to the nitty gritty and pick apart this ingredient panel (remember that each ingredient is listed by weight)... first ingredient is corn, a high sugar/high carb vegetable which a.) is unnecessary, b.) is not as digestible, and c.) can promote inflammation. Second is a by-product which the American Association of Feed Control Officials(AAFCO) defines as "the ground, rendered, clean parts of the carcass of slaughtered chicken, such as necks, feet,

undeveloped eggs and intestines, exclusive of feathers, except in such amounts as might occur unavoidable in good processing practice.” There’s no actual meat in a by-product. More unnecessary grains and then ‘animal fat’ - from what ‘animal’ I ask? Most likely from a rendering plant that disposes of rancid grease from a fast food restaurant. More grains and what’s that? Holy Moly actual meat! From a cow!! But remember that this cow could have been dying from a horrible disease or was riddled with tumors before it was slaughtered, and since it couldn’t be used in the human food chain due to health restrictions and safety laws, it gets put into your family dog’s food. More grain and then... SUGAR! Cheap energy and a lifetime of purchased bags for Beneful since sugar is just as appealing and addicting to dogs as it is to us. Then they throw in propylene glycol which is a very close relative to anti-freeze - yep, you heard right, ANTI-FREEZE. Anti-freeze ingestion is an extreme medical emergency and can mean life or death if not treated immediately. Meat? There’s no reference to the original animal that this meat comes from and therefore shockingly could actually be rendered euthanized cats and dogs according to the EPA(5). Some vitamins, minerals, carrots and peas so there’s at least SOMETHING that you recognize in the panel followed finally by artificial colors that are solely put in so YOU the owner of the checking account think the food looks good but these colors can actually be detrimental to your best friend’s health.



Nature's Variety Instinct Chicken Formula Raw Dog Food
Chicken, Raw Ground Chicken Bone, Turkey, Turkey Liver, Turkey Heart, Apples, Carrots, Butternut Squash, Ground Flaxseeds, Montmorillonite Clay, Chicken Eggs, Broccoli, Lettuce, Spinach, Dried Kelp, Apple Cider Vinegar, Parsley, Honey, Salmon Oil, Olive Oil, Blueberries, Alfalfa Sprouts, Persimmons, Duck Eggs, Pheasant Eggs, Quail Eggs, Inulin, Rosemary, Sage, Clove. (7)

This product truly doesn't need too much explanation, I think that we all know what chicken, turkey, apples, squash, and olive oil are. The one that I get asked about the most is the Montmorillonite Clay which is a natural source of over 50 trace minerals as well as an ingredient that binds to dietary toxins and eliminates them from the body.

Yes, they both are deemed complete and balanced dog foods meeting the government's and AAFCO's rules for dog nutrition but the choice is UP TO YOU what you put into your dog's bowl each and every day.

Tracy Werner has owned and operated Natural Pet Market, a health food store for dogs since 2002, lives with her adopted pack, and is active in dog rescue efforts.

Links and Resources

- (1) The American Heritage® Science Dictionary
- (2) Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary

- (3) The American Heritage® Science Dictionary
- (4) [Collins English Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged](#)
- (5) www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/ap42/ch09/final/c9s05-3.pdf
- (6) www.beneful.com
- (7) www.naturesvariety.com

www.dogfoodproject.com

www.dogfoodadvisor.com

www.aafco.org

www.merckvetmanual.com

www.thetruthaboutpetfood.com

www.naturalpetmarket.com