

## Food For Thought: The Complete Guide to Your Dog's Diet

**There's much more to canine nutrition than just kibble and canned food. We explore it all to give you a well-rounded perspective on your dog's dietary needs.**

*By Marcia King*

### Dry versus canned

Dry dog food is more economical and a bit easier to feed than canned, says veterinary nutritionist Rebecca Remillard. However, dry food is a complex product, whereas the canned version of the same usually contains different ingredients. If dry food is causing a stomach problem, the canned version may be an option.

Canned food contains few or no preservatives because the canning process preserves the food. It is usually more palatable, and contains significantly more water, which can be good for a pet who needs more hydration. However, canned foods can start to spoil after sitting out for more than 30 minutes and are more costly for the nutritional value.

**Myth-buster:** Recent research has shown there is no difference between the effects of dry or canned food on oral health or the degree of plaque and calculus accumulation, says veterinary nutritionist Iveta Becvarova. Dental diets work because of the ingredients they contain and how the kibbles are formulated, not because they are dry, she explains.

### Portion control: How much does he really need?

Some dogs seem to pack on the pounds just by strolling by the pantry. That's why it's important to keep in mind that the suggested serving ranges on that dog food label are just that: Suggestions. Estimates. A starting point. Not a strict, prescribed amount.

To determine the right portion size for your dog: Rather than start with the largest portion in the range, begin with a portion size between the bottom and middle of the range, Remillard suggests. "After 30 days, weigh your dog. If he's gained weight, feed him less."

When trying a new formula, monitor your dog's weight and body condition every two to four weeks, adjusting portions as needed, advises Becvarova.

Use a standard measuring cup for consistent accuracy and to feed the correct amount.

Keep in mind that some breeds are more prone to obesity and require much smaller servings than other breeds.

### Tasty terminology: Natural, organic, holistic, human grade

Many dog foods are promoted as being "natural," "organic," "holistic," or having "human-grade" ingredients. But what do these terms really mean and, crucially, are there standard criteria that make these terms meaningful?

**First things first:** Yes, there is some regulation and accountability regarding the use of these terms. "The terms 'natural' and 'organic' are regulated by AAFCO; 'holistic' and 'human-grade' are not specifically defined by AAFCO," states veterinary nutritionist Edward Moser, industry consultant to the USDA National Organic Program's Pet Food Task Force. "All of these terms receive the same oversight from the Federal Trade Commission's truth in advertising laws. Whatever the label or ad says must be the truth."

**So what do they mean?** Moser explains: "A natural pet food cannot contain any chemically synthesized ingredients except for vitamins and minerals."

"Until specific pet food organic labeling guidelines are adopted, right now AAFCO models enforcement on what the human regulations are, that is different levels depending on the percentage of organic ingredients. For example, '100 percent organic' must have 100 percent organic ingredients. 'Organic' must have 95 percent organic ingredients. 'Made with organic' would mean a minimum of 70 percent organic ingredients."

"'Human-grade' has no AAFCO definition, although there is some talk about coming up with one. Right now the term is mainly an indication that the product contains ingredients from processing plants that supply ingredients for human consumption."

“Holistic’ describes the entire management system of the animal — what the pet eats, where he eats it, where he sleeps, what kind of healthcare he gets — rather than the specific dietary attributes of a pet food.”

#### Food Formulas: Choices abound

Dog food is not a one-size-fits-all sort of recipe, as nutrient requirements vary according to an individual dog’s stage in life and activity level, Syverson explains. AAFCO mandates two nutrient profiles as the basis of a complete, balanced diet: One for adult (maintenance) dogs, and one for growth and reproduction. The percentage range of protein, fat, etc., for any AAFCO-labeled pet food must fall within one of those two profiles.

But after nutritionists identified other life-stage demands, dog food manufacturers created and refined formulas to address specific lifestyles (active, senior, etc.). Ditto for therapeutic (veterinary) diets, developed to ease clinical signs of and sometimes slow or halt progression of disease, and nonprescription special-needs diets, which contain increased or added nutrients that could aid specific conditions. “Regulations define any product intended to cure, treat, mitigate, or prevent a disease or condition as a drug product, therefore prescription-type diets are only available through a veterinarian,” Syverson notes.

#### Home cookin’: A good choice?

Why do some dog owners bother with home-cooked doggie meals when there are convenient commercial alternatives? For some folks, homemade meals are a lifestyle choice that celebrates natural foods. Forget about the boxes, cans, and bags. Nothing but fresh meats and produce for themselves — everything made from scratch. And that goes for the family dogs, too.

Some pet owners, concerned and scared about last year’s pet food recall, believe that home-prepared meals offer a reliably safer alternative to commercial formulas. Keep in mind, though, that human foods also get recalled due to contamination. “Our food is no safer than pet foods,” warns Susan Lauten, Ph.D.

Sometimes it’s what the doctor ordered. “In cases where the animal has more than one disease and there is no appropriate veterinary food product which addresses those conditions, I recommend home-prepared meals,” Remillard says. Also, if a dog is near death from illness and not eating, a homemade diet may encourage him to eat.

Although home-prepared meals are generally more expensive and time-consuming, it’s not difficult to provide complete and balanced nutrition if you are careful, Remillard says. “It’s usually just proper portions of meat and grain, plus or minus vegetables, and a vitamin-mineral supplement. However, you must know which supplements to add to the meal, so you should discuss your recipe with a nutritionist or veterinarian first.”

For healthy homecooking, always measure your ingredients, follow the recipes exactly, don’t substitute ingredients, and cook and store prepared food properly, Lauten advises.