

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

Food and diet fascinate, perhaps even preoccupy us – what's wholesome and what's not, what keeps us trim, what plumps us up.

Naturally, as dog owners, we're equally interested in what we're putting into our pets' food bowls. Questions abound: Are homemade diets more nutritious than commercial formulas? Should we strive to feed our dogs an "ancestral diet," that is, a diet closer to the type of food wild dogs would have found in nature? Or, if commercial diets are the preferred choice, which is the best option: dry or canned? Should we provide added vitamin or mineral supplements? Should we switch diets every couple of months? And how the heck do you read that label? Do terms such as "organic" or "holistic" really mean anything? Are those serving size suggestions realistic? What's the difference between a "low calorie" and "reduced calorie" formula?

Definitely food for thought. We'll address those questions and more, so just dig in and make your selections from the following menu.

The history of pet food: How it all began

"Let them eat cake." That's the phrase that James Spratt, an American lightning rod salesman in 1860s London, used to describe his idea for feeding dogs. Spratt wasn't referring to a gooey confection beloved by sweet-toothed humanoids, but a baked, biscuit-type food for dogs. A blend of wheat meals, vegetables, beet root, and meat, Spratt's "dog cake" became the world's first commercially produced dog food. Legend claims this burst of inspiration occurred when Spratt was offered inedible, discarded ship biscuits, aka hardtack military rations, for his beloved canine friend.

Success in England soon led to manufacturing operations in the United States, with other entrepreneurs eventually jumping on board the gravy train.

"Today hundreds of companies produce pet food from coast to coast, with the 20 largest manufacturers producing well over 90 percent of the products on the market," notes Duane Ekedahl, president of the Pet Food Institute.

Some six decades after Spratt introduced his dog cake, Ken-L-Ration brought canned pet food to market in 1922. Three years later, Gaines Food Company began producing a dry meal formula food for dogs. It was another 32 years before the next innovation came along — extruded pet food, the coated kibble now familiar to today's consumer, which was launched in 1957 by the Ralston Purina Company.

Meanwhile, during the 1930s, veterinarian Mark Morris Sr. began forging a new path for pet food when he proved that particular ingredients and nutritional choices could help manage the effects of kidney disease in dogs. Morris took his knowledge to the Hill Packing Company, and as a result, in 1948 Hill's Prescription Diet k/d Canine became the first commercially produced therapeutic formula.

"Most early pet foods were more trial and error," Ekedahl says. "Today's pet foods are carefully formulated to meet the complex nutritional needs of cats and dogs, and are the result of decades of nutritional research."

Nutrition 101: What do dogs need?

Protein, fat, carbohydrates, and key vitamins and minerals, all in the correct ratio, are the foundation for a complete and balanced diet, says David Syverson, chair of the AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) Pet Food Committee. Protein provides mass, muscle, and bone strength, builds and repairs body tissues, helps maintain normal nerve and muscle function, and makes cells. Proteins form enzymes that metabolize food into energy and hormones that regulate various body functions such as salt and water balance.

Fat provides concentrated energy, contributes to taste, is essential for healthy skin and coat, provides the body with essential fatty acids, and helps with the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins.

Carbohydrates, composed of sugar, starches, and dietary fiber (grains and vegetables), provide energy and help

digestion.

Vitamins and minerals are involved with various roles, including metabolic functions, energy production, and electrolyte and fluid balance.

Making sense of the label

Deciphering a pet food label isn't easy. Syverson explains that it can be confusing because labels usually contain a mix of required information and voluntary marketing information — "the latter of which is usually emblazoned in far bolder font and style than the required information."

The label information that counts the most and that you should look for is: Nutritional adequacy statement, which defines the purpose (i.e., adult, puppy, etc.) of the product.

Ingredient list, presented in descending order of weight. The first three to five ingredients comprise the majority of the contents of the food.

Guaranteed analysis, which indicates the minimum or maximum percentages of protein, fat, fiber, and moisture in the product.

Feeding directions give you a starting point for how much to feed your dog.

Careful with calories: Calories usually aren't listed, but roughly, the more fat in a product, the more calories, although the amount of water and fiber in a formula skews that correlation. To compare caloric values between a canned and a dry food on a rough basis, multiply the value for the canned food by four.

When calories are listed, they must be listed as "kilocalories per kilogram," Syverson says. (One kilocalorie or "kcal" equals one calorie, and one "kilogram" equals 2.2 pounds.) However, manufacturers may also include calories "per cup" or "per can."

As for those weight control formulas: "Light," "lite," "low calorie," and similarly designated products cannot exceed a certain number of calories. "Lean" or "low fat" products cannot exceed certain fat percentages. "Reduced calorie" or "reduced fat" products contain fewer calories or fat than a product of comparison, although not to the degree of being either "lite" or "lean."

The bottom line: If you want or need to know calories, fat, etc., for a food before you try it, call the company for detailed information.