

Wonder Food

An important trend in nutrition research is aimed at preventing disease, not just treating it.

Susan H. Bertram, DVM

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Dose of InsulinWaltham also offers a diet formulated to manage diabetes mellitus. It contains 7.5 percent fat, and its blend of soluble and insoluble fiber has been clinically proven to help regulate blood glucose levels and may allow a lower dose of insulin, Dr. Sokolowski said.

Food allergies, which can cause itchy skin and dermatitis in dogs, may also cause some forms of inflammatory bowel disease, a syndrome of vomiting, diarrhea and weight loss. Managing these conditions requires finding a diet the dog can - and will - eat and that will not cause an allergic reaction. Ralston Purina Co. offers a diet that contains a modified protein which, because of the small size of the protein molecule, a dog's system will not recognize as an allergen. "It is a true hypoallergenic diet," Hannah said.

Renal-failure diets typically rely on restricted protein levels to reduce the buildup of urea in the blood, which must be cleared by the kidneys. But restricted protein can worsen muscle wasting and weakness in renal- failure patients, because renal failure is a protein-losing disease. The animal begins to break down its own muscle mass. To prevent those problems, The Iams Co. last year introduced a renal-failure diet that delivers higher levels of proteins for better nutritional support but uses fermentable dietary fibers to enhance blood flow and bacterial activity in the large intestine. Bacteria can actually trap urea in the colon, reducing how much must be cleared by the kidneys Dr. Carey said.

Periodontal disease also can be addressed through diet. One manufacturer offers diets made to reduce plaque and gingivitis. "It's a good example of a product matching a need," said Debra Nichols, Ph.D., vice president of product development for Hill's, "because periodontal disease is such a common health problem in dogs, and dog owners are more aware and concerned about dental disease in their pets."

Commercial diets aren't the only option for a dog with special dietary needs. At the University of California, Davis, the veterinary nutrition service uses a computer program to develop and analyze homemade therapeutic diets for dogs. The service is available to veterinarians, who can contact the school and provide the medical details needed to develop the appropriate diet. There are pros and cons compared to commercial formulations, Dr. Bowers said. "With a homemade diet, you can use ingredients that aren't available commercially and can customize the diet to the patient. For example, if a dog has pancreatitis and kidney disease, it needs a low-fat diet plus restricted protein and phosphorus." The disadvantage of a homemade diet is the difficulty in determining if it is complete and balanced, because controlled feeding trials aren't done. In addition, he said, "A big problem occurs when people change ingredients, such as substituting chicken for beef in a recipe. It totally changes the diet."

Dog owners need to work with their veterinarians to determine which, if any, therapeutic diets are appropriate for their dogs. "Few medical conditions are solely responsive to diet," Dr. Bowers said, "but nutritional therapy is an important complement to other medical treatment. We try to integrate the two."