

Wonder Food

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

Susan H. Bertram, DVM

While dog food manufacturers don't yet offer such futuristic formulations, "it's not outside the realm of possibility," said Timothy Bowers, DVM, who is completing a Ph.D. in veterinary nutrition at the University of California, Davis. "An important trend in nutrition research is aimed at preventing disease, not just treating it, but we're very early in the learning curve."

Fortunately, nutritional therapy - using nutrition as part of a treatment for a specific disease - already helps treat many chronic diseases and can prevent some common health problems.

Therapeutic diets offer specialized nutrition for a medical problem - adding or reducing nutrients that are known to influence certain organ systems or metabolic pathways - to lessen symptoms and simply make the pet feel better.

The first commercially available medical diet, formulated by Hill's Pet Nutrition of Topeka, Kan., for dogs with kidney failure, appeared 50 years ago. Since then, many pet food manufacturers have developed dozens of therapeutic diets. Special diets for dogs address heart failure, food allergies, diabetes and bladder stones, to name a few.

The decision to research a certain type of diet evolves from scientific considerations and consumers' suggestions. "We pay careful attention to what is going on in scientific arenas, even in human medicine, and ask the question 'Why are we seeing this?' and 'Is it something that diet might influence?'" said Dan Carey, DVM, director of technical communications for The Iams Co. in Dayton, Ohio. In addition, consumers are becoming more knowledgeable about nutrition for their pets, said Steven Hannah, Ph.D., nutrition scientist at Ralston Purina Co. in St Louis. "They are demanding better products and technical explanations for what they're feeding."

Many manufacturers maintain research facilities, where they study nutrition in healthy dogs. Clinical trials, where diets are tested in ill patients, are conducted in cooperation with veterinary colleges and veterinarians in private practice. "Nutritionists, engineers, food scientists and veterinarians are all part of the research-and-development team," said Mike Hand, DVM, a board-certified veterinary nutritionist and vice president of research for Hill's.