

Customize Your Puppy's Diet

Expert advice for feeding your new puppy a healthy diet.

Farrell R. Clancy

Buying puppy food is one time you don't want to pinch pennies. All of our experts agree: You get exactly what you pay for. This does not necessarily mean that you must buy the most expensive food for your pup, but as behavior-medicine expert Jeff Nichol, DVM, and independent practitioner at the Veterinary Centers of America Wyoming Animal Hospital, puts it, "You don't get what you don't pay for."

So, if you're buying the least expensive food, it's likely to have lower-quality ingredients. "In the end, buying high quantities of a low-quality food is not as cost-effective as spending a little more money on a quality diet that satisfies your pup," Nichol advises.

Deciphering the Label

Each brand of dog food labels its formula differently. For instance, a diet for puppies may be labeled "puppy formula," "growth" or "all lifestages." What's the difference and which should you choose? The main thing: Make sure you are buying food specifically for puppies, called "growth" or "puppy." Like baby foods, puppy food is specially formulated to have all of the nutritional value a growing pup needs the right amount of fats, carbohydrates and protein. These amounts can vary, but dry commercial puppy food typically contains 26 to 30 percent protein and up to 20 percent or more fat.

Terri Shumsky, author of *How to Buy and Raise a Good Healthy Dog*, recommends choosing a food that contains between 20 and 24 percent protein. "If your puppy is not extremely active, there's no need for a high level of protein," adds Darlene Arden, author of *The Angell Memorial Animal Hospital Book of Wellness and Preventive Care for Dogs*.

In addition, watch fat content, "especially in breeds prone to pancreatitis [Miniature Poodles, Bichons Frises and Miniature Schnauzers, for example]," Arden says. Too much fat in the diet is one of the main causes of pancreatitis, an often-fatal inflammation of the pancreas.

What else should you look for on the label? "You want to know how easily the food converts into energy," says Nichol, who is also a pet-care columnist for the Albuquerque Journal newspaper. The nutritional term for this is bio-availability — the extent to which a nutrient can be used by the body. "Unfortunately," he continues, "even someone with a Ph.D. in animal nutrition has difficulty understanding the label analysis. It takes research into how the manufacturer tested and came up with the formula."