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What Should I Feed My Pet: Part I

Choosing a pet food today is not easy, given the many options available. Recalls, reviews and recommendations from friends, breeders, and health professionals make the process even more confusing. Without a background in nutrition or biochemistry, many owners are easily swayed by marketing claims and testimonials.

Our priority is the health and safety of your animal, not selling a particular brand. Fortunately, there are many quality options available. We hope that some of these guidelines will help you choose the ideal diet for your pet.

AAFCO: American Association of Feed Control Officials. Look for this seal on the pet food bag to ensure that the food is complete, balanced, and meets all the nutrient requirements. Also make sure the **guaranteed analysis, calories, ingredient list, and manufacturer's contact information** are on the label. The AAFCO is a recommendatory group only; the State Feed Control Official and FDA play a major role in enforcing pet food rules.

Prescription: Only available through prescription from a veterinarian. These diets are formulated for specific disease conditions and have gone through extensive clinical trials for safety and efficacy. These findings are documented in veterinary and scientific peer-reviewed journals and the companies stand by the claims.

Hypoallergenic/Low Allergen: These prescription diets are specially formulated to reduce the size of the digested protein, so that the body's immune system is not triggered to attack that protein. These diets are usually used in animals with allergic conditions.

Organic: Although the pet food industry has no official organic standard, most brands follow the human organic program. An organic food must contain a USDA seal to show it meets the human guideline. **Natural** usually means that no fat preservatives (ethoxyquin, BHA, BHT) have been added. Some natural products still contain synthetic trace nutrients so are not totally natural. **Holistic**, which means of the whole or complete system, is another unregulated term that consumers associate with being healthy or all-natural, but some holistic products still contain synthetic materials.

Human-Grade: There is no standard for the use of human-grade. Many pet foods that do not say "human-grade" contain items that are, yet consumers are swayed by the implied safety of this label. Human-grade items can still have safety issues (think E.Coli on spinach), but the U.S. has one of the best food safety programs in the world.

Gluten-Free/Corn-Free/Grain-Free: Going "grain-free" is not wrong, however, there has been no clinical evidence to support going grain-free in an otherwise healthy animal. Grains are important fiber and carbohydrate sources. Contrary to popular belief, most food allergic animals are sensitive to the protein. For owners with healthy animals who are still skeptical, try a diet with the protein listed as the first ingredient. Make sure the grain-free diet has all the required labels on the bag, as stated above. Going grain-free is probably a better option for cats than dogs, since cats are obligate carnivores, which means they derive all of their nutrients from whole prey. There is much debate on whether or not dogs and cats should be on a grain-free vs. an animal product-free (vegan) diet. We do not advocate vegan diets for cats at this time.