

Reading a Pet Food Label

By Sally Perea, DVM, MS, DACVN, Senior Nutritionist & Kari Liu, MS, Core Brands Managing Nutritionist

The label on a pet's food can tell one a lot of information, if one knows how to read it. There are a few key sections that can help when comparing different foods, as well as picking the best food for a pet.

Product Name

The name of the product is probably one of the first things that is noticed on the label. One may not realize it, but the product name says a lot. For example, if the product name includes a percentage, say 95%, that product must contain at least 95% of the named poultry, meat, or fish ingredient. If the product name includes a descriptor like "formula", "dinner", "recipe", or "entrée", it must be at least 25% of the named ingredient(s). Also, if you notice that the label includes a phrase such as "with peas" or "with apples", that product must contain at least 3% of the named ingredient. The exception to this rule is any named nutrient, including vitamins and minerals, as they would not necessarily be included at 3%. Finally, if a flavor designation is included in the product name, it must be identified as such in the ingredient list but the level of inclusion is not specifically dictated. Although all information on the label must be truthful and substantiated, there are no specific regulations for product brand names.

It is important to pay close attention to the product name, as well as the other pieces of information being communicated on the front panel. This is an ideal location for graphics, claims and product features intended to capture one's attention and encourage their purchase.

Ingredients

The ingredient list is one of the most important pieces of information to evaluate on the back panel of a pet food label. The ingredient list must be listed in the order of weight (from the greatest to the least); therefore, ingredients with the highest inclusion are located at the beginning of the ingredient list, while those with the lowest inclusion are listed at the end. AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) defined ingredient terms are used, and AAFCO guidelines also state that ingredient listings must be the same size, style and color font, and cannot include any quantitative terms or reference to quality or grade. Because of these rules it is difficult to assess variation in ingredient quality; this is why it is important to also select foods from companies with trusted high quality ingredients.

When evaluating an ingredient list, it is important to look for high quality protein sources such as meats, meat meals, and eggs. Also important are sources of essential dietary fats such as chicken fat, vegetable oil (such as sunflower oil), and fish oil (such as herring oil). Whole grain ingredients, grain free carbohydrate sources such as peas and potatoes, and fresh fruits and vegetables are also healthful ingredients for pet foods.

Guaranteed Analysis

From the ingredient list, the next section to evaluate is the guaranteed analysis. According to AAFCO, the guaranteed analysis must include the minimum crude protein content, minimum crude fat content, maximum crude fiber content, and maximum moisture content. These guarantees are all meant to protect the consumer and provide worthwhile information about the product. Foods that have been marketed as "low" or "reduced fat" must also list the maximum fat content. Other nutrients of interest may also be included in the guaranteed analysis, such as important fatty acids (such as EPA & DHA), and vitamins (such as vitamins E & vitamin C). Because the guaranteed analysis is expressed as minimums and maximums, the nutrient levels are not meant to reflect the exact amount. The average (or typical) nutrient analysis provides more specific information regarding the nutrient levels for the food of interest.

The guaranteed analysis is expressed as a percent on an "as fed" or "AF" basis. This means that if the label reads "10% crude protein", it contains 10 grams of protein per 100 grams of food AF. While expressing nutrient amounts on an AF basis is practical when considering the natural form of the food, it is less practical when comparing products. This is especially true when comparing canned and dry products. Because of their high moisture content, the AF nutrient levels in canned foods will always be much lower than AF nutrient levels in dry foods even for foods with similar proportions of nutrients. Even small variations in moisture and/or fiber levels within canned, or within dry food products can make it difficult to compare nutrient content. For this reason, the AF values should be converted to a dry matter (DM) or metabolizable energy (ME) basis for product comparison.

For assistance with nutrient values, calculations, and/or comparisons, please contact a Natura Product Advisor at 800-532-7261.

Nutritional Adequacy Statement

The nutritional adequacy statement provides information on the appropriate life stage(s) for the product, and states if the food has been formulated or has undergone and passed an AAFCO feeding trial for a particular life stage. Foods that have been "formulated" to be complete and balanced are based on nutrient content calculations to ensure that the nutrient levels meet the AAFCO Dog or Cat Food Nutrient Profiles for the specific life stage(s), i.e., maintenance or growth and reproduction. Alternatively, foods can pass the requirements for an "AAFCO feeding trial" claim for the specified life stage(s), which include adult maintenance, growth, and/or gestation/lactation.

One should always check to make sure that the selected food is appropriate for the species and life stage of the pet.

Feeding Guidelines

Finally, all pet food labels should provide feeding directions on how much food should be fed to the pet on a daily basis. These guidelines should be viewed as estimations that can provide a starting point, and may require adjustments for the individual needs of the pet. Most feeding directions are based on calculated maintenance energy requirements (MER) for a body weight or body weight range. It is known that an individual animal's true energy needs can vary as much as 50% from the calculated MER; therefore, it is important to monitor the body weight and condition of the pet and adjust the amount fed as needed to maintain an ideal body weight and condition. With the exception of "light" or "lite" pet foods, calorie statements are not required on pet food labels.

Calorie information is provided on the label of all Natura pet foods, helping pet parents to feed the right amount of food to keep pets in an ideal body condition.

At Natura Pet Products, we have a staff of fully trained Product Advisors and nutritionists, as well as a skilled manufacturing team. Please feel free to contact us at 800-532-7261 if you should have any questions.

