



# Be a label detective

How to read and understand pet food labels

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“Chicken by-product meal... wheat gluten...preserved with BHA/BHT...” If you’ve ever taken a close look at the list of ingredients on a commercial pet food package, you’ve probably found yourself wondering what all these things really are. If you’re seriously concerned about good nutrition for your dog or cat, however, you need to learn how to read and interpret pet food labels.

## Ingredients 101

Pet food manufacturers are required to list all the ingredients in their products. Each ingredient must be listed in order of its weight. This is one of the better ways to determine the actual quality of the food. With a little knowledge of the ingredients themselves, you can then choose a food that is more appropriate, more digestible and free of unwanted products.

### 1. Grains

Dogs and cats are carnivores and need raw meat and bones. They weren’t meant to eat a grain-based diet, yet many commercial pet foods have a high content of grains and grain products.

The most common include:

- barley
- brown rice
- corn



- corn bran
- corn gluten
- corn gluten meal
- ground corn
- corn syrup
- ground dehulled oats
- ground wheat
- ground whole brown rice
- ground whole wheat
- ground yellow corn
- kibbled corn
- soybean meal
- wheat bran
- wheat flour
- wheat germ meal
- wheat gluten.

Choosing a product with the smallest possible quantity of grains will help prevent eventual health problems.

## Hint

Be aware of the tactics used by commercial manufacturers to disguise less desirable ingredients. For example, if you were to group together all the wheat ingredients on a pet food label, the wheat would be the primary ingredient, not the chicken touted on the package.

### 2. By-products



Meat by-products are refuse or leftovers from the human food industry. They include parts of the animal not

used for human consumption, such as heads, feet, bones, blood, intestines, lungs, spleens, livers, ligaments, and fat trimmings. Even unborn baby animals are considered a by-product.

None of these ingredients in themselves are bad for a carnivorous animal – after all, wild dogs and cats eat them when they consume their prey – but the condition of the by-products that go into pet food is questionable. They can often be diseased or spoiled, for instance.

### 3. Meat meal, poultry meal, animal digest



These are very common ingredients in most packaged pet foods. “Meal” could be translated as rendered-down “food”. It’s made by boiling down leftover parts from carcasses to remove or separate fats, take out the water and so on. The idea is to kill any bacteria, viruses, and parasites to make the food “safe” for consumption.

## Hint

Dead, dying, diseased and disabled (known as 4-D) animal protein sources are banned in human food, but can still be legally used for pet food.

The problem is, the rendering process is done at such high temperatures (270°F/130°C) that the valuable enzymes and proteins in the raw ingredients are also “rendered” useless, or destroyed. These enzymes and proteins are critical to good health.

### 4. Vegetable protein and gluten



Think “glue” when you read “gluten”. In pet food, gluten is used to hold dry kibbles together, and is also added to canned foods.

Soybean meal protein is another newly favored ingredient in commercial pet foods. Original pet foods had a lot more meat in them, but thanks to the demand for bigger profits, grains, vegetable proteins and other cheap ingredients have replaced the high meat content in most commercial pet foods. The result? Severe nutritional deficiencies.

### 5. Preservatives and other additives

These ingredients are in all commercial pet foods, although the canned diets are a bit better than the dry foods.

Because pet foods have been highly overcooked and are now denatured, something has to be added back in to improve their taste and appearance. They must also have preservatives to lengthen their shelf life for the retailer and buyer. While many of these ingredients fall under the GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe) guidelines, this doesn’t necessarily mean they are good for our pets.

Ingredients to watch out for are butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA), butylated hy-



droxytoluene (BHT), and ethoxyquin. All are synthetic preservatives and potentially cancer-causing. Another red flag additive is propylene glycol (also used as a less toxic version of automotive antifreeze). This ingredient lends a sweet taste to the food and is used for flavor enhancing, but it’s not something that should be part of a dog or cat’s daily diet.

### What is AAFCO and what does it do?

AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) develops guidelines for the production, labeling, and sale of animal foods. They have developed two standards they feel pet foods should meet. All pet foods which meet AAFCO requirements must include one of two statements on their labels:

1. “Formulated to meet AAFCO’s nutrient requirement.” This standard simply means the food was tested in the laboratory and was found to have the “recommended” quantities of protein, fat, etc.



2. “Animal-feeding tests using AAFCO’s procedures substantiate that this product provides complete and balanced nutrition.” For a pet food to carry this label, it has to be tested on a population of animals for six months and shown to provide adequate (not optimal) nutrition.

Here’s the catch. If one particular product in a manufacturer’s line is tested and found to meet this standard, the company is now allowed to include the same statement on other products in the same “family” that provide equal or greater concentrations of all the