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## Proper Nutrition For Your Cat and Dog

Your pet may not be exactly what he or she eats, but good food makes a tremendous difference in how well your cat or dog lives. Proper nutrition is essential at all stages of your pet's life. Nutritional imbalances can lead to a variety of physical and behavioral problems. Some become apparent immediately, while others may manifest as a serious health threat as the animal gets older.

In recent years, the pet food industry has churned out hundreds of brands which vary widely in price and quality. Choosing the right food for your companion may seem an overwhelming challenge. The following will help you make informed choices about what you feed your cat or dog.

### What's out there?

At the grocery store, you can find a range of commercial pet food products. Generic or house brands are the cheapest and are generally made from the poorest quality ingredients. These are not the best choice.

If you have no option other than the grocery store, stick with well-known name brand. Basic chows or ration-style canned foods usually contain fewer additives and fillers than those marketed as "gourmet" offerings. Usually sold in small cans or packages, these novelty foods, are highly preserved, have lots of sugar and fat, and are the equivalent of human junk food.

At pet supply and feed stores, you can buy premium brands. Rather than meeting maximum or minimum standards, most premium brands aim for optimal nutrition. They are usually more expensive than grocery store brands, but they can save costs hidden in cheaper diets. Ideally, a pet eats less of the better food, digests more of it, and leaves less waste.

At the veterinarian's, you can buy food for animals with specific dietary requirements. Many of these are sold by prescription only and are used in conjunction with other veterinary treatments.

### What's in there?

No matter where you buy pet food, it is a good idea to read labels. Avoid brands that feature long lists of chemicals. Preservatives, colorings, artificial flavorings and scents are usually added in small amounts, but in combination, and over time, these chemicals can undermine your pet's health.

Other common ingredients are labeled "meat-by-products." These are slaughter house remnants and can include moldy, rancid or spoiled processed meats as well as diseased tissues. Whenever possible, buy brands that list the meat itself (beef, chicken, lamb, etc.), and not by-products.

### Your cat's needs

Cats need twice as much protein as dogs. Dry cat food, can be a good source of protein, but since many have a high concentration of some minerals (known collectively as ash) they can also contribute to Feline Urinary Syndrome (FUS). Look for low ash foods (magnesium no more than .08-.10% of content, and a calcium to phosphorus ratio of 1:2:1). Avoid fish-based foods, especially tuna because it is high in ash and can lead to a Vitamin E deficiency in cats.

Younger cats need to be fed more often than older ones, and meal sizes and frequency must be adjusted as the animal grows. Adult cats should be fed two separate meals each day.

## **Your dog's needs**

There are many factors that determine your pet's nutritional requirements. For example, age affects the need for, and tolerance of, protein. Disease can increase the need for some nutrients while decreasing the ability to absorb others, and activity levels and temperament provide clues to your dog's metabolism. Diets should be chosen to meet specific needs and adjusted as those needs change.

A balanced menu provides nutrients to meet energy needs and maintain ideal weight. Dogs do not need as much protein as once believed, and can easily adjust to, and benefit from, a vegetarian diet. Younger dogs need to be fed more often than older ones, and meal sizes and frequency must be adjusted as the animal grows.

### **Important points to remember**

- Other factors including age and general condition determine your pet's nutritional requirements. Diets should be chosen to meet specific needs and maintain ideal weight.
- Obesity is the most common nutritional problem in dogs and cats, prevails in older animals and results in part from over-consumption of appealing commercial foods.
- An animal of normal weight has ribs that, while not easily seen, can be felt without an upper layer of fat.
- Buy the very best pet food your budget allows. Premium brands usually offer the best nutrition.
- Avoid generic brands.
- Stick to basic food and avoid novelty products that have flavor "enhancers" and other additives.
- Talk to your veterinarian about your pet's specific needs. There are premium foods formulated for all stages of an animal's life.
- Set a feeding schedule that works for you and your pet, and be consistent. Consult your veterinarian for a feeding schedule that suits your pet's needs and age. For cats, do not leave food out between scheduled feedings.
- It may take some time for your pet to develop a taste for a premium diet if she or he is accustomed to highly flavored commercial foods. Be persistent, and switch your pet to the new diet gradually.
- Provide your pet with fresh water at all times. Do not give milk to your kitten or cat.

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