

The Dreaded Question: *What Should I Feed My Pet?*

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Proper nutritional management is one of the most important factors in managing health and disease in pets. As clients become more aware of the importance of nutrition in their own health, they will expect this same higher standard of nutritional care for their pets. The veterinary healthcare team should be the preferred, expert source of the best nutritional information for pets.¹ Veterinary teams that understand and promote clinical nutrition and demonstrate in-clinic behaviors consistent with this conviction will benefit their patients, their clients, and their practices. Proper nutritional management is one of the most important factors in maximizing health, performance, and longevity in addition to managing disease conditions.

Clients are inundated with information about foods for their pets through every media avenue. So, when they come to the veterinary healthcare team with the question—*What should I feed my pet?*—how does one answer?

Know Your Resources

In 2010, AAHA published Nutritional Assessment Guidelines² for veterinary practices, followed in 2011 by the publication of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) Nutritional Guidelines.³ These guidelines were developed to support veterinary healthcare teams in the development and implementation of nutritional management protocols tailored to the individual needs of the patient (see petnutritionalliance.org and wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit). Both organizations, with the assistance of veterinary nutritionists, veterinarians, and credentialed technicians, have developed tools to help healthcare teams educate clients on what they should feed their pet. These tools are provided to aid the veterinary team in determining what the pet should eat as well as offering a resource to help make a specific nutritional recommendation.

As with any recommendation, the veterinary healthcare team must do the research. When investigating the question “How do I distinguish one food from another?” look for answers to the following:



- Is the manufacturer's contact information available on the product for the veterinary team and pet owner?
- Does the manufacturer employ full-time veterinary nutritionist(s), veterinarians, and credentialed veterinary technicians?
- Where are the foods produced and manufactured?
- Are specific quality control measures in place to assure product consistency and quality?
- Will the manufacturer provide a complete nutrient analysis for the pet food in question—above and beyond the guaranteed analysis?
- Has the product undergone research? And are the results published in peer-reviewed journals?


These initial questions assist the team in determining if the product is made by a reputable and knowledgeable company. It also helps to ascertain if the manufacturer follows strict quality control measures.

AAFCO Nutritional Adequacy



In addition to researching the quality behind products, the team should research the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) nutritional adequacy statement included on pet food labels to help determine the following important facts⁴:

continues

Tastes like




Works like

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- ✓ Full strength, clinically proven efficacy

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

1. Is the diet complete and balanced? All wellness foods should be complete and balanced.
2. If the food is complete and balanced, for which life stage is the food intended?
 - Nutrient profiles and feeding trial requirements for growth, reproduction, and adult maintenance are provided by AAFCO.
 - The healthcare team should be aware that foods listed as formulated to meet the AAFCO profiles for all life stages must meet the minimum nutrient levels for both growth and adult maintenance.
3. What method was utilized to substantiate that the food is complete and balanced?
 - AAFCO feeding trials:
 - Were the products fed to the intended species and intended life stage?
 - Does the product label state "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate [Product Name] provides complete and balanced nutrition for [life stage(s)]"?
 - AAFCO nutrient profiles:
 - Do the foods meet AAFCO nutrient profiles by formulation or by analysis of the finished product?
 - Does the product label state "[Product Name] is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO (Dog or Cat) Food Nutrient Profiles for [life stage(s)]"?

Formulated foods are manufactured so the ingredients meet specified levels, either based on the recipe or on analytical testing of the finished product, without testing via feeding trials.

The Bottom Line

The healthcare team should be educated and proactive when discussing nutrition with clients. There are differences amongst manufacturers, products, and lifestyles, and team members should not be afraid to ask the questions. This will allow the team to present a researched and educated nutritional recommendation and preempt the *I read this on the internet* response. ■ **cb**

References

1. **Nutrition: Is the new emphasis a fad?** Burns KM. *Vet Team Brief* 5:8-9, 2014.
2. **AAHA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines for Dogs and Cats.** Baldwin K, Bartges J, Buffington T, et al. *JAAHA* 46:285-296, 2010.
3. **Nutritional Assessment Guidelines.** WSAVA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines Task Force. *J SMALL ANIM PRACT* 52:385-396, 2011.
4. **AAFCO Official Publication 2015;** accessed Jan 2015.

Suggested Reading

Association of American Feed Control Officers. www.AAFCO.org; accessed Jan 2015.

Labeling & Labeling Requirements. AAFCO; www.petfood.aafco.org/labelinglabelingrequirements.aspx; accessed Jan 2015.