



Choosing the Best Food for Your Dog by Robin Knepp Bennett

As a professional dog trainer, I talk to many owners who are concerned about their dog's hyperactivity, lack of focus, and general inability to learn. Owners are often surprised to learn some of their concerns can be resolved, in part, by a change in diet. Since a dog's diet can have a dramatic influence on the animal's mood, ability to learn and overall health, behavioral counseling always includes information on choosing the best food for the dog.

With so many different brands of dog foods on the market today, choosing a healthy diet for your dog can be overwhelming. I will attempt to discuss some common areas of concern in choosing the best food for your dog.

How do you decipher dog food labels? Just as with human food labels, dog food ingredients are listed in descending order by weight. We know in choosing cereal for our children, a listing of ingredients that displays sugar first contains more sugar than any other ingredient. The same is true of dog food. The combination of the first three ingredients make up the bulk of the food and is usually indicative of the overall quality of the food. Finding "meat" listed as the tenth or eleventh item in the list usually means very little meat is actually used.

Which ingredients should be listed first? A healthy diet should be based on an adequate protein source such as meat. Ingredients may list "meat by-products" or "meat meal". Generally speaking, meat meal is the better option. Meat by-products are those items left over after the meat is removed from the animal source. Since by-products are not actually meat, they can often be difficult for your pet to digest. Meat meal, on the other hand, is meat after the water and fat have been removed. Meal is highly digestible and filled with approximately 65 percent protein. Grains are often included in dog food as a protein source. They are usually used because they are a cheaper alternative to meat. However, a larger volume of food must be eaten to fulfill the nutritional needs of the dog if grains are used as the primary protein source.

Are any ingredients bad for my dog? In people, a diet free of chemicals, colorings, and other fillers is considered far superior than one which is pre-fabricated and chemically preserved. The same is true for dogs. Chemicals and other additives are used in dog foods for several reasons: to make the food more palatable to the dog; to make the food more appealing to the human eye; or to preserve the dog food.

However, dog food that is free of chemicals and naturally preserved is better for your dog. Constantly eating chemicals, food coloring, additives and other fillers is no better for our pets than it would be for us.

Corn, a relatively inexpensive ingredient used in many dog foods, has been linked with some behavioral concerns. Recent studies indicate that corn can inhibit the uptake of serotonin, which makes it more difficult for the dog to "chill out" and focus on training.

Better quality diets are made without preservatives or artificial colorings. The chemicals BHA and BHT are a particular concern when used in foods. These products are usually added to preserve the food but have also been shown to cause cancer in livestock. Most dog food manufacturers are beginning to take BHA and BHT from their food lines. A better preservative for dog food is Vitamin E or Vitamin C.

Are some dog food brands better than others? Generally speaking, most dog foods can be classified into three primary categories: commercial brands, premium brands, and super premium brands. The commercial brands are usually found in supermarkets and grocery stores. These brands are, by far, the cheapest in terms of cost per pound. A cheaper price usually means cheaper ingredients. Although the cost per pound is relatively low, owners feeding commercial brands will have to feed a much larger portion to their dog in order to meet the animal's nutritional requirements.

Premium brands are usually better quality than the commercial brands. They tend to be slightly more expensive, but feeding requirements are slightly less than commercial brands. In other words, smaller amounts of the higher quality foods can be fed to achieve the correct nutritional level.

In today's market, a new classification of foods has been developed. These foods, known as super premium dog foods, take a holistic approach to dog feeding. They usually have the highest quality ingredients and often use more meat and meal as the main source of protein as compared to commercial and premium brands which use mostly grains. The super premium brands contain no "fillers" such as artificial colorings, flavoring, or chemicals, and they are usually preserved with Vitamins E and C. Super premium

brands are usually purchased through distributors or shipped directly to your door from the company (usually at no cost). The food is usually prepared in small batches and is fresher than commercial or premium brands.

How do you know if your dog is eating a well-balanced diet? First, examine the overall health of the dog. The eyes should sparkle, the ears should look clean and smell fresh, and the coat should be glossy. If your dog has chronic ear or eye infections, has red or draining eyes, licks his paws all the time, or constantly bites at himself (as if he has fleas although you can't find fleas), talk to your vet or a holistic health practitioner about possible food or environmental allergies.

Dogs, like people, can have allergies and illnesses due to a weakened immune system. The immune system may fail after repeated ingestion of a poor quality diet. The effects may not be immediate but may be caused by a gradual chemical build up that weakens the immune system over time. Dogs can also be allergic to items in the food, such as wheat or beef, that can cause health problems.

Some behavioral problems caused by an inadequate diet may include: extreme bouts of hyperactivity, short attention span, or inability to learn. Owners of dogs with such problems often describe the dogs as unruly, untrainable, and wild. I compare these dogs to children after they have eaten a large volume of candy. The child, like the dog, will have

no attention span due to the inadequate diet. However, for the dog, the same "junk food" is being fed day after day, and the dog will always appear hyperactive.

Other complaints come from owners who describe their dogs as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in that the dog's personality seems to change dramatically throughout the day. One minute the dog is sweet and peaceful, the next minute the dog is racing around the room, biting and snapping at everything. Often the change in behavior can be linked to the feeding schedule.

If your dog displays any of the problems mentioned in this article, or if you would like to improve your dog's overall health and appearance, consider a change in diet. If your dog is on a particular diet due to a medical condition, be sure to talk to your vet before switching food. If you decide to switch foods, make the change a gradual one since a sudden change in diet can upset the dog's digestive system and cause diarrhea.

All About Dogs recommends choosing a food recommended by "**Whole Dog Journal**," the periodical rated number one for health and behavior information by the members of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT). All of these recommended choices are indicated with an asterisk in the list of dog foods that begins on page 3.

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Dog Food Labeling Rules

(from p. 71 of *Dog Health & Nutrition for Dummies*, by Christine Zink)

Beef for dogs: Must contain 95% beef by weight

Beef dog food: Must contain 70% beef by weight

Beef dinner, beef entree, or beef platter: Must contain 25% beef by weight

Dog food with beef: Needs to contain only 3% beef

Beef-flavored: Doesn't need to contain any beef; it just needs to taste like beef (using artificial flavors)

Meat: Clean flesh of slaughtered cattle, swine, sheep, or goats. It must come from muscle, tongue, diaphragm, heart, or esophagus.

Meat and bone meal: Rendered from mammal tissues, including bone. Other than that, it is similar to meat meal.

Meat by-products: Fresh, non-rendered, clean parts of slaughtered mammals. It does not include meat, but does include lungs, spleens, kidneys, brains, livers, blood, bones, fat, stomachs, and intestines. It cannot include hair, horns, teeth, or hoofs.

Meat meal: Rendered meal made from animal tissues. It cannot contain blood, hair, hoofs, hide trimmings, manure, or intestinal contents or extraneous material. It may not contain more than 14% indigestible materials. Lamb meal is made from lamb parts. Meat meal is made from cattle, swine, sheep, or goats.

Vocabulary 101 (p. 75)

Animal by-product meal: Rendered animal tissues that don't fit any of the other ingredient definitions. It can't contain hair, horns, hoofs, hide trimmings, manure, or intestinal contents or extraneous materials.

By-products: Meat by-products are non-human-grade proteins obtained from animal carcasses. They can vary greatly in their digestibility, and there is no way to for the consumer to determine their digestibility.

Poultry (or chicken or turkey) by-product meal: Ground, rendered, clean parts of the carcass of slaughtered poultry, such as necks, feet, undeveloped eggs, and intestines. It cannot contain beaks or feathers.

Poultry (or chicken or turkey) by-products: Non-rendered clean parts of slaughtered poultry such as heads, feet, and guts. It must not contain feces or foreign matter.

Rendering: The process by which animal parts are heated slowly over a long period of time to liquefy the fat so it can be removed. What remains is mainly dry proteins and is called *meal*. (You partly render your bacon when you put it on a paper towel before putting it in the microwave. The heat liquefies the fat, which drips onto the paper towel. The bacon comes out dry and crispy.)

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Top Three Ingredients in Popular Dog Foods (Asterisk indicates one of Whole Dog Journal's recommended foods)

- Active Care Lamb & Rice** . . . brown rice, lamb meal, bovine cartilage
- Alpo** . . . ground yellow corn, wheat middlings (a granular product of milling), meat & bone meal
- *Artemis** . . . chicken meal, turkey meal, brown rice
- Authority Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, ground yellow corn
- Avoderm** . . . wheat flour, beef meal, ground rice
- *Azmira** . . . beef meal, whole ground barley, oatmeal
- *Back to Basics** . . . chicken meal, ground corn, chicken fat
- *Bench & Field** . . . chicken meal, ground brown rice, whole ground barley
- Beneful (Purina)** . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-product meal, corn gluten meal
- Bil-Jac** . . . chicken by-products (organ meat only), chicken, corn
- *Burns** . . . brown rice, ocean fish meal, peas
- *California Natural** . . . lamb meal, brown rice, rice
- *Canidae** . . . chicken meal, turkey meal, brown rice
- Canine R/D Prescription Diet (Hills)** . . . ground corn, peanut hulls, poultry by-product meal
- Canine Caterers** . . . see "Nature's Select"
- Cycle Adult** . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-product meal, feeding oatmeal
- *Drs Foster & Smith Chicken & Brown Rice** . . . chicken, chicken meal, brown rice
- *Drs Foster & Smith Lamb & Brown Rice** . . . lamb meal, lamb, brown rice
- *Drs Foster & Smith Puppy** . . . chicken, chicken meal, brown rice
- *Drs Foster & Smith Senior** . . . chicken, brown rice, rice
- *Eagle Pack Holistic Select** . . . chicken meal, ground brown rice, whole ground barley
- Eukanuba Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb, rice flour, ground yellow corn
- Eukanuba Maintenance** . . . chicken, chicken by-products meal, corn meal
- Eukanuba Premium Performance** . . . chicken, chicken by-products, ground corn
- *Flint River Ranch** . . . chicken meal, wheat flour, ground rice
- *Flint River Ranch Dry Water** . . . chicken meal, whole wheat flour, whole chicken
- *Flint River Ranch LC** . . . chicken meal, wheat flour, ground rice
- Giant brand** . . . ground yellow corn, corn gluten meal, soybean meal
- *Go! Natural** . . . chicken meal, chicken meat, whole brown rice
- Gravy Train Beef Flavor** . . . corn, soybean meal, meat and bone meal
- Hi Pro** . . . ground yellow corn, corn gluten meal, ground brewer's rice
- *Hund-n-Flocken** . . . lamb meal, ground millet, ground brown rice
- Iams Chunks & Mini-Chunks** . . . chicken, corn meal, ground grain sorghum (tropical grass related to Indian corn)
- Iams Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb meal, rice flour, corn meal
- *Innova** . . . turkey, chicken, chicken meal
- Kibbles & Bits** . . . ground yellow corn, ground wheat, soybean flour
- *Limited Diets Duck & Potato** . . . potatoes, duck, duck meal
- *Lifespan** . . . chicken, chicken meal, ground whole brown rice

- *MMillenia** . . . beef meal, ground barley, ground brown rice
- *Natural Balance Ultra Premium** . . . chicken, brown rice, duck
- Nature's Best (Hills)** . . . brewer's rice, ground wheat, turkey meal
- Nature's Recipe Chicken Meal** . . . chicken meal, ground rice, cracked pearl barley
- Nature's Recipe Dog** . . . ground wheat, ground brown rice, wheat bran
- Nature's Select Chicken, Rice, & Lamb** . . . chicken meal, ground rice, rice bran
- Nature's Select Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb meal, ground rice, rice flour
- Nature's Select Puppy** . . . chicken meal, ground rice, poultry fat
- Nature's Select Ultra-Lite/Senior** . . . ground rice, ground barley, poultry meal
- Nutro Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb meal, ground rice, rice bran
- Nutro Max** . . . chicken meal, wheat flour, ground rice
- Nutro Natural Choice Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken meal, ground rice, rice bran
- Old Roy** . . . ground yellow corn, meat and bone meal, corn gluten meal
- Pedigree Lamb & Rice** . . . ground corn, chicken by-product meal, ground wheat
- Pedigree Performance** . . . ground corn, chicken by-products, chicken meal
- Pet Gold Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, whole grain brown rice
- Pet Gold Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb, lamb meal, brewer's rice
- Pet Gold Puppy Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, whole grain brown rice
- Pet Gold Senior Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, whole grain brown rice
- *PHD Canine Growth & Maintenance** . . . lamb meal, poultry meal, brown rice
- *Pinnacle** . . . chicken meal, whole ground chicken, whole oat flour
- *Prarie** . . . lamb, barley, brown rice
- *Prime Life** . . . chicken meal, turkey meal, whole brown rice
- Pro Plan Adult** . . . beef, brewer's rice, ground wheat
- Pro Plan Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken, brewer's rice, ground wheat
- Pro Plan Performance** . . . chicken, corn gluten meal, brewer's rice
- Pro Plan Puppy Chicken & Rice Formula** . . . chicken, brewer's rice, poultry by-product meal
- Purina Dog Chow** . . . ground yellow corn, soybean meal, meat & bone meal
- Purina Fit & Trim** . . . ground yellow corn, soybean meal, soybean hulls
- Purina O.N.E. Beef** . . . beef, brewer's rice, ground yellow corn
- Purina O.N.E. Chicken** . . . chicken, ground yellow corn, ground wheat
- Purina O.N.E. Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb, brewer's rice, ground yellow corn
- Purina O.N.E. Puppy** . . . lamb, brewer's rice, corn gluten meal
- Purina Puppy Chow Balanced Nutrition** . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-products meal, corn gluten meal
- Purina Puppy Chow Beef** . . . ground yellow corn, corn gluten meal, brewer's rice
- Purina Puppy Chow Large Breed** . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-products meal, corn gluten meal
- Regal Adult Bites** . . . turkey meal, ground rice, corn meal
- *Royal Canin** . . . chicken meal, brown rice, oatmeal
- Science Diet Canine Growth** . . . ground corn, poultry by-products meal, soybean meal
- Science Diet Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, rice flour
- Science Diet Large Breed Puppy** . . . corn meal, chicken by-product meal, corn gluten meal
- Science Diet Savory Recipe** . . . beef, brewer's rice, rice flour
- Sensible Choice Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken meal, brewer's rice, rice hulls
- Sensible Choice Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, rice hulls
- *Showbound Naturals** . . . chicken, chicken meal, brown rice
- Solid Gold** . . . see Hund-n-Flocken or Mmillenia
- *Timberwolf Organics** . . . lamb meal, ground oats, ground barley
- *Verus** . . . chicken meal, ground oat groats, ground brown rice
- Waltham Growth** . . . chicken by-products, ground rice, ground corn
- Waltham High Performance** . . . chicken by-products, ground corn, corn gluten meal
- *Wellness Fish & Sweet Potato** . . . white fish, ground barley, rye flour
- *Wellness Super5Mix** . . . lamb, lamb meal, white fish
- *Wysong** . . . chicken, chicken meal, ground brown rice