Common Nutrition Misconceptions

We talk to dozens of clients on a daily basis about pet nutrition. The same comments, concerns and misconceptions come up over and over again. Here are a few of the ones we hear most often.

1) Corn is bad (False!)

There are quite a few carbohydrate sources commonly used in pet foods. Corn, rice, oats, potato and barley are some you might see listed on pet food labels. Truth to tell, there isn't a lot of difference between them. Corn is actually a little more digestible than rice and has a better amino acid balance. Just as with human food, whole grain is probably better than processed flour, so maybe whole oats or brown rice is better than corn meal or wheat flour. But let's say a cat eats 3 different mice. One mouse was eating corn, one mouse was eating rice and one mouse was eating potatoes before it became the cat's dinner. It really doesn't matter. You'd never be able to tell the difference between a cat that eats mice that fed on oats from one that eats mice that fed on corn.

2) Soy is bad (False!)

Soy is good for us and good for pets, too. The isoflavones and other antioxidents in soy beans help prevent cancer. Beans in general are good sources of fiber, iron and B vitamins. Unless the majority of the protein contained in the food comes from the soy instead of animal based sources there is nothing at all wrong with a food containing soy. It's also not a common ingredient for pets to become allergic to, despite what the guy at the pet store tells you.

3) By-products are bad (False!)

Much of the food we eat every day contains by-products, which are nothing more than parts leftover after the primary use of the food ingredient has been satisfied. Gelatin in our Jello is a by-product. Hot dogs contain by-products. Cheese is made from the by-products of butter manufacturing and fiber supplements like Metamucil are made from by-products, too. It's wasteful to throw away millions of pounds of hearts, livers and kidneys from millions of slaughtered animals, just because those items make some Americans squeamish. Eating just the skeletal muscle meat is an extremely nutrient-deficient diet. Dogs and cats need the liver of the mouse to get vitamins A, D, E and K, as well as iron. Eating the brain provides fatty acids when lean wild animals they prey on don't provide a lot of fat for the diet. The chicken's heart or the cow's lungs are full of nutrients that pets can use. As long as the by-products don't consist of feathers, beaks and feet, there is nothing wrong with seeing by-product meal on a pet food label.

4) The first ingredient on the label should be a meat source

It's very easy for manufacturers to cheat on this. Let's say the ingredients for a bag of dog food include 15 lbs. of rice and 5 pounds of poultry meat meal. Since the regulations state that the heaviest ingredient must be listed first, this puts the rice first instead of the meat. So the



manufacturer decides to use 3 piles of different grains at 5 lbs each instead of one big pile of one kind of rice. Now we have 5 lbs each of meat meal, white rice, brown rice and brewers rice. That still doesn't quite move the meat to the top, what should we do now? Well, we just add a little extra water to the meat meal to make it heavier! Now we have 7 lbs of meat and 5 lbs each of three different types of rice. Perfect, we can list the meat first and then the rice. See how easy it is to fudge the label?

5) Meat is good, "fillers" are bad

To a certain extent this is true. Good quality meat protein is important. However, too much protein is as bad as too little. Protein is needed to build tissue and to make most of the chemicals and cells in our bodies, from red blood cells to enzymes to hormones. But any extra protein is just going to be burned as fuel. Feeding a diet too high in protein is like burning furniture to heat your house. Fats and carbohydrates provide energy more efficiently and with fewer waste products that need to be handled by the liver and kidneys. Many grocery store canned pet foods are very high in protein, and it is often poor quality p rotein, meaning it's not very digestible. This means lots of extra work for the liver and kidneys to get rid of all the ammonia that is produced when these ingredients are broken down and digested. In an older pet with failing kidneys this may shorten life expectancy by several years (yes, years). The quality and digestibility of the protein is at least as important as the amount, and you can't tell this from reading the pet food label.

6) Vegetables in the dog food make it better (FALSE!)

Again, this is such a difficult thing to analyze from reading a label. How much is really in there? Eating a carrot and taking a baby aspirin every day are good for you. But eating a tenth of a carrot or taking a tenth of an aspirin probably won't do very much. Without being able to tell how many potatoes, carrots or what have you are in a bag, a can or a cup of pet food it's pretty difficult to judge the quality. With no government oversight we don't even have any assurance that the ingredients listed on the bag are the ones going into the food, much less whether there's 1 carrot per ton or 100. Take this popular concept with a grain of salt.

7) A pet food is better because it contains (choose one or all) glucosamine/prebiotics/probiotics/chicory/digestive enzymes/fish oil/etc.

It's the same with pricey ingredients like fish oil, probiotics or flax seed as it is with the vegetables. How much is really in there and is there enough to have a beneficial effect? Most of the time it's not, so you are paying a lot for benefits your pet isn't actually getting. For some of these ingredients there is very little evidence that they work in the first place and even less for how much is a therapeutic amount or whether the ingredient is safe. For a medication to be approved, the drug manufacturer has to prove both efficacy and safety. For nutritional additives no proof whatsoever is required. We would generally recommend a pet food to have a shorter, more simple ingredient list than to contain 20 unproven extra additives and 6 or 8 different grains and vegetables.

Those simple ingredients need to be high quality ones though. Less expensive pet foods, especially low-cost grocery store brands, may have a shorter ingredient list but the poor quallity of those ingredieints makes that brand a poor choice anyway. You want a high quality food but paying more for a list of fancy added extras with dubious benefits isn't always better.



