

Variability of Weight-Loss Diets Confuses Owners



Most brands of pet food come in different formulations for different circumstances, including weight control. Unfortunately, there are wide variations in how many calories per cup of food these diets contain. Dry dog foods marketed for weight loss range in calorie density from 217 to 440 kilocalories per cup (kcal/cup). This means that if you feed the same amount of two different brands of "light" dog food, one could have twice as many calories per cup as another!

The recommended daily food amount also varied, from 0.73 to 1.47 times the dog's resting energy requirement. This means that if you fed the amount listed on the food bag you may be providing as little as 73% of the amount of calories a dog should need in a day, or as much as 47% more than the dog needs.

Owners buying pet weight-loss diets are faced with a confusing variation in calorie density, recommended intake and cost range for low-calorie foods. In addition, manufacturers vary in how they determine feeding directions for normal-weight pets. "There is so much information and misinformation about pet foods, it's understandable that people are confused about what to feed their dogs and cats," said Dr. Lisa Freeman, a veterinary nutrition professor at the veterinary school at University of California-Davis. "To counteract these myths, people are accustomed to turning to the labels on food, but, as this study shows, packaging might not always be a reliable source of information."

Federal guidelines require pet foods labeled "lite," "light," "low calorie" or "less calorie" to adhere to a maximum kilocalorie-per-kilogram restriction. Freeman said more than half of the foods evaluated exceeded the maximum. In other words, half the pet foods labeled as lower calorie weren't. (If the diets weren't formulated or labeled properly in this instance, what else isn't being done properly with these diets?)

Dr. Freeman's group has also studied senior diets. Senior diets theoretically should be lower in fat and sodium and easier to digest. As with low calorie diets, there was a lot of inconsistency and most foods tested were not substantially different than adult formula dog foods. The same variability in calorie density was found as well.

These studies demonstrate why we prefer prescription diets to any over-the-counter diets when we are trying to accomplish something with the food. Whether it's for weight loss, food allergy, dental tartar control or low sodium for heart or kidney disease, you simply don't know what you are getting in store bought diets.

Prescription diets, on the other hand, are formulated exactly and are tested to meet FDA requirements. The manufacturer has to prove through clinical trials that the food is and does what the label says. There are no variations from batch to batch and every batch is tested to make sure it meets the formula.

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