



A Very Brief Guide To Dog Food Labelling

Introduction

In the last ten years or so, people have begun to be so much more food conscious and are increasingly concerned about how their food is farmed, the welfare of the animals bred for food, the carbon footprint of the companies that bring the food to our shops and also about how food and additives to food affect our health and behaviour.

When people start to consider what food to feed their dogs they often have similar questions and concerns as with their own food but are unsure about how to go about finding the right food for their dog's health and wellbeing and also their own budget.

Interpreting Food Labels

Commercially available dog food varies enormously and it is very hard to know where to start, but the following should enable you to analyse the food label on any dog food packet.

- If you buy small bags, check the ingredients on the corresponding large bag in the shop - small bag labels don't have to be as detailed by law. Don't buy bags of dry food to last a long time as the vitamin content will deplete.
- Ingredients are labelled with the greatest ingredient first and the least last. Look for foods where the first two ingredients are specifically named. These will probably be a meat and a cereal. Make sure these are named i.e. 'chicken', 'rice' or 'lamb', 'potato'. Avoid products that simply say 'cereal' or 'meat and meat derivatives'.

- Cereal is a term used to describe any grains used in dog food and the digestibility of these varies considerably. The more easily digestible they are the more expensive they are to the manufacturer. If a manufacturer is using a good quality grain, they usually want you to know that and label it clearly e.g. Brown Rice.
- If a manufacturer uses low digestibility grain, your dog's body will not be able to use it very well and this will pass in the form of large, soft, very smelly poo. This also means that your dog will be hungrier and need more food. Cereals such as sorghum and corn/maize are not very digestible at all and yet they are on the ingredients lists of several top brand foods.
- Manufacturers who use low digestibility cereals often refer to these as just 'cereals' which gives you no information about what cereal. It also means the manufacturer can put whatever the cheapest cereals are that week and put those in, so ingredients can vary from batch to batch. Many people tell their vets when the dog has been sick in some way that they haven't changed the food recently, but although they haven't changed the *brand* the manufacturer may well have changed the ingredients.
- Try to find foods where the meat is the largest quantity, but be aware of how grains and so on can be 'split'. The example below is an illustration only and not from an actual dog food:
 - Turkey (min 32%), Brown Rice (28%), Wheat, Turkey fat, Maize, Peas, Soya, Alfalfa
 - From this you can see that although there is more turkey than rice, there are far more grains and cereals in the whole list than there is meat.
- Avoid products which contain 'derivatives' of meat, just 'meat' or 'animal fat' or any general terms like this. These terms tell you nothing about what is actually in the food. The front of the packet may say 'Beef' but if

you look closely many actually say 'with Beef' and on the ingredients label you often find that 'beef' is only a small part of the total meat content, but the rest may not be obvious.

- Meat derivatives can be any part of the animal including heads, feet, internal organs and so forth. The animals used have to be 'fit for human consumption' in the UK but that includes the whole animal and the term 'meat derivative' nicely covers what manufacturers don't want you to know.
- Avoid any food with EC Permitted Additives as these could be the kind of colourings and flavourings and preservatives that cause behavioural and health problems. A packet that says 'no artificial preservatives' usually has artificial colours and flavours. A label that says 'no artificial colours or preservatives' will usually have artificial flavours and so on.
- Check that even the fat is named - 'animal fat' could be any animal.
- You should be able to tell exactly what the meat is in your dog's food, this is essential for understanding your dog's health, his or her preferences and particularly working out intolerances and allergies. Many dogs are bathed with medicated shampoos, given supplements and vitamins and even prescribed steroids for itchy skin, when a good quality diet with a single meat source and single grain source may be all that is needed. Even if that doesn't work immediately, at least ingredients can be ruled out and ruled in and other foods tried.
- Look for products where the meat is clearly named throughout the ingredients list. Some foods may have 'x' percentage of lamb for example at the top of the list, but if there are 'meat and meat derivatives' further down the list, the same issues apply.
- 'Meal' is fine as long as it is named i.e. 'Duck meat meal' this just means dried, ground duck. In fact when a meat is dried, you will get a higher percentage of meat than a food that uses 'fresh meat' because the fresh meat can be measured before processing i.e. before all the water is

removed. Meal has to be free from hooves, horn, bristle, hair and feathers as well as digestive tract content.

- Beef and chicken are in fact common allergens in dogs, which in the case of chicken is a surprise to many people, but many of the premium brands foods do not have chicken or beef varieties for this very reason. That said, chicken is an easily digestible protein for dogs that are tolerant of it, but beef is less digestible than chicken, lamb and turkey.
- Digestibility means the degree to which the dog's body can use the food, so less digestibility means more wastage and less use to the dog, regardless of the laboratory measured protein content written on the packet. Protein percentages are very misleading and it is not true that too much protein always causes behavioural problems; in fact low protein can cause behaviour problems too. The answer is to try different good quality foods and find which one suits your dog physically and behaviourally.
- The following preservatives: E320 - BHA - Butylatedhydroxyanisole; E321 - BHT - Butylatedhydroxytoluen; E324 - Ethoxyquin, which could be written as the E number or the name or the abbreviation, have been proven to cause cancer in people and dogs and while there may be claims that they are safe, do you really want to take the risk? Good foods contain natural preservatives, usually 'tocopherals' which are a blend of vitamins "E" & "C".
- The following list is a brief guide to other ingredients:
 1. Ash isn't an ingredient; it is just the total mineral content.
 2. Digest is a flavour enhancer that can be natural or not.
 3. Products of vegetable origin and soy products are bulking agents with little nutritional value and dogs are often intolerant of soy.
 4. Egg is an excellent source of protein.
 5. Potato is a good alternative to rice for rice allergic dogs.
 6. Sugar beet pulp is a good source of fibres.

- Be aware that many popular brands contain very high levels of sugar which cause higher activity levels, tooth decay and also make it more difficult for the dog to accept a healthier food. Avoid any food that has sugar on the label.
- There is no definitive answer to whether dry food or moist food is better, see what your dog likes and just make sure it's healthy. Dry food doesn't protect teeth very much better - providing things to chew on and brushing your dog's teeth does that.
- If you want your dog to enjoy dry food more, try using pet mince or a good quality wet food mixed in. Don't teach your dog that by refusing food he will get tastier and tastier things added, just make it tasty from the outset.
- Try feeding food in food dispensing toys - much more fun for your dog and make help him enjoy it more too.
- It doesn't follow that the more you pay the better the food is as there are some awful foods that cost the earth, but equally, you rarely get a good cheap food.

Suggested Foods

By popular request I have compiled a brief list of some dog foods I can suggest, with varying costs that are currently reasonably free of artificial additives, sugars and so on. This is NOT a list of recommendations as my own research causes me to be rather sceptical about commercial dog food generally. There are also many more good foods than are on this list - please view this a starting point for your own research into the best diet for your dog.

Please always double check any food against the separate advice sheet on how to read food labels as foods do change over time. Please do also consider feeding a raw food diet (known as BARF - Biologically Appropriate Raw Food), resources and suppliers listed below also.

The websites shown below are the company's own websites, but do check out on-line stores such as www.zooplus.com who list all ingredients and have free delivery, and www.petplanet.co.uk

Remember also that most independent pet shops in the county will order most foods for you and many vets will too.

Pet Shop Food

- James Welbeloved (dry & moist)
- Wainwrights (dry & moist)
- Burns (dry food)
- Pets at Home own brand (dry)
- Butchers Tins - not the best quality meat but the loaf variety is all meat & meat derivatives unlike many tins which are full of soya and other fillers.
- Natures Menu: pouches, tins and raw packaged meats available at Pets at Home and on-line at www.naturesmenu.co.uk
- Nature Diet moist holistic food with vegetables and rice
- Royal Canin dry food

Local Franchises

- Oscars - Helen Coney 01437 541414, will deliver, provide nutritional advice and bring free samples.
- Trophy - Judith Thomas 01367 240333 will deliver and bring free samples.

On-Line Dog Food

- Arden Grange www.ardengrange.com
- Challenge www.challengedogfood.com
- Orijen www.rijenpetfoods.co.uk
- Harringtons www.harringtonsdogfood.co.uk
- Gelert www.gelert-petnutrition.co.uk
- Fish for Dogs www.fish4dogs.com

At www.zooplus.com you will find a huge array of dog foods (with lists of ingredients) that you may never have heard of but that are 'natural' or 'organic' and so forth, for example: Josera; Defu Organic; Happy Dog Natur-Croq and many more. It is worth looking through all the food, prices and ingredients and trying a few small bags to see what your dog likes.

Biologically Appropriate Raw Food

Many people ask me about raw feeding and the best advice I can give is to point you in the direction of a couple of really good books, available from Amazon and possibly to borrow from me:

'The Barf Diet' by Dr Ian Billinghurst

'Real Food for Dogs and Cats' by Kymythy Shultz

More and more people are switching their dogs to raw foods and seeing remarkable benefits but it is important to read up on it and find a feeding plan that suits you and your dog.

General Rules

Dogs should be fed a diet that is high in bone content and contains about 50% liquidised fruits and vegetables (half meat half fruit & veg). Fruit and veg should ideally be over-ripe and definitely liquidised and mixed with mince.

Bone content can be provided by buying meat from suppliers who mince the bone too, or by feeding lots of raw meaty bones. The meat should be varied and of the best quality you can afford.

Provide fresh organ meat once a week, e.g. liver, heart etc. Liver can be too high in vitamin A for dogs so feed sparingly, heart is a good option.

Dogs do not *need* cereals or rice or pasta and these are common allergens and even when dogs are not actually allergic they do not suit their systems well. Things like buckwheat, millet and Quinoa can be added as fillers if you want to.

Use a good mineral and vitamin supplement whether your dog is on raw meat or other diet. SUPERDOG ULTIMATE NUTRITION FOR DOGS is recommended by Nick Thompson *BSc (Hons) Path Sci., BVM&S, VetMFFHom., MRCVS of*

www.holisticvet.co.uk . *SUPERDOG* is available through Nick's website and also has lots of dog feeding advice.

You can choose how 'convenient' you want your dog's raw diet to be. Companies like Natural Instinct mince the meat with vegetables and brewers yeast and kelp, so you can just defrost and serve. Other companies provide meat chunks and minces that you have to add your own fruit and vegetables to.

Raw food suppliers

It is easy to DIY through a local butcher but you will probably pay more. The following companies make BARF feeding really easy.

www.naturalinstinct.co.uk

They provide complete convenient frozen raw foods with vegetables and fish oils already added. They deliver to your door (minimum order may apply).

www.prizechoice.co.uk and <http://naturesmenu.co.uk/>

Prize Choice is a sister company of Natures Menu and they both sell plain minced meats and chunks and also minced meats mixed with minced vegetables and fruit. They deliver to your door (minimum order may apply).

www.landywoods.co.uk

Landywoods are significantly cheaper than most of the others and sell simple, straightforward minced meats, meat chunks and meaty bones. Landywoods deliver as far as Llanboidy where Pembrokeshire people can collect their food. When enough people do this from our area we may be able to organise delivery closer to us.

<http://www.berriewoodwholesale.co.uk/>

Berriewoods sells raw food and many others.

<http://www.honeysrealdogfood.com/vets.php>

Honeys Real Dog Food is a similar company to Natural Instinct.