

# Understanding Your Pets Food Labels

## What do Pet Food labels mean?

Reading your pets' food labels is one of the best ways to determine the quality of the food you are feeding them. The ingredients and the guaranteed analysis are included on the pet food label. In addition to providing info about the amount and quality of protein and fat, the label will also give the ingredients and general feeding guidelines.

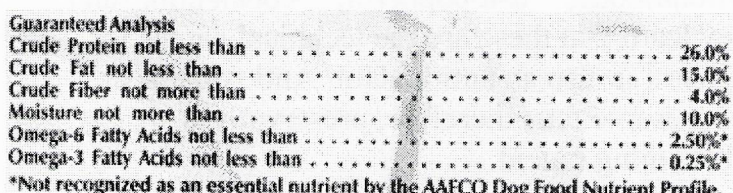
Pet food labels must include: 1. the food type and product name 2. Net weight 3. Guaranteed analysis 4. Ingredient content 5. Manufacturers or distributor's name and address and 6. "a claim that the pet food meets or exceeds the requirements of one or more of the recognized categories of nutritional adequacy: gestation, lactation, growth, maintenance.

1. The “**food type**” means that the label must state whether it is made for cats or dogs. The product name describes the food, and many words are used as part of the product name to appeal to consumers, such as “dinner, platter...” AAFCO has rules for their use:

If you see:	The product must contain:
<i>Beef</i> (or other meat)	At least 95% beef (minus water for processing)
Beef <i>Dinner</i> (entree, etc.)	25-94% beef
<i>With</i> beef	At least 3% beef
Beef <i>Flavor</i>	A “detectable” amount

2. The **net weight** is the amount of food in the container, often in pounds and grams. It may give a rough estimate of the energy density of canned foods, many of which contain about 1 Cal/gram as fed. One reason to read the net weight when comparing foods is that manufacturers sometimes reduce the size of containers without changing the price. For example, what many think of as a “16 oz.” can is really 13.2 oz., and a “6 oz.” can really be 5.5 oz.

## 3. Guaranteed Analysis



Guaranteed Analysis	
Crude Protein not less than	26.0%
Crude Fat not less than	15.0%
Crude Fiber not more than	4.0%
Moisture not more than	10.0%
Omega-6 Fatty Acids not less than	2.50%*
Omega-3 Fatty Acids not less than	0.25%*

\*Not recognized as an essential nutrient by the AAFCO Dog Food Nutrient Profile.

The guaranteed analysis on the information panel of the dog food label lists the minimum levels of crude protein and fat and the maximum levels of fiber and water as a percentage. The protein and fat are listed as crude sources and not as digestible sources. The digestibility of a protein or fat can vary widely depending on their sources. The list of ingredients should be examined closely to determine how digestible the sources are and the actual protein and fat percentages in the amount of moisture present in the food as discussed earlier. These percentages are listed on an as-fed basis. “As fed” simply means the percentage of each nutrient, including water or moisture, contained in the final product the pet consumes. To compare products on a level “playing field,” one should always use the dry matter (without moisture) equivalent listed on pet food labels. If a dry matter basis is not used, canned food appears to have a lower concentration of nutrients than dry food because the latter contains approximately 10% water and canned food contains approximately 75% water.

## 4. Ingredient List

Ingredients: Chicken, Corn Meal, Ground Whole Grain Sorghum, Chicken By-Product Meal, Ground Whole Grain Barley, Fish Meal (source of fish oil), Chicken Fat (preserved with Mixed Tocopherols, a source of vitamin E, and Citric Acid), Dried Beet Pulp (sugar removed), Natural Chicken Flavor, Dried Egg Product, Brewers Dried Yeast, Potassium Chloride, Salt, Dicalcium Phosphate, Choline Chloride, Ferrous Sulfate, Zinc Oxide, Vitamin E Supplement, DL-Methionine, Ascorbic Acid, Manganese Sulfate, Copper Sulfate, Manganous Oxide, Vitamin A Acetate, Calcium Pantothenate, Biotin, Thiamine Mononitrate (source of vitamin B<sub>1</sub>), Vitamin B<sub>12</sub> Supplement, Niacin, Riboflavin Supplement (source of vitamin B<sub>2</sub>), Inositol, Pyridoxine Hydrochloride (source of vitamin B<sub>6</sub>), Vitamin D<sub>3</sub> Supplement, Potassium Iodide, Folic Acid, Cobalt Carbonate.

All pet foods must include an ingredients list and organized in descending order by weight. However; this does not reveal the amounts of the ingredients. *For example*, wheat germ meal, wheat bran, and wheat flour are all components of wheat, but they may provide different nutrients. Be cautious, manufacturers can disguise less desirable ingredients this way as well. Breaking an ingredient into several different smaller ingredients and listing them individually can be used to lower these undesirable ingredients farther down the ingredient list. *For example*, a product list could contain chicken, ground corn, corn gluten, ground wheat, corn bran, wheat flour etc. If we were to group all of the corn ingredients as one, they would probably far out-weigh the amount of chicken, and wheat. As a consumer, you must read all of the ingredients carefully including the ingredients at the end, to know the type of preservatives and colorings that are used.

The ingredient list falls into **five** major categories: **water, energy sources, protein sources, and vitamins** and **minerals** added to balance the food, as well as a variety of other substances added for different reasons. This list is also valuable when a patient has a confirmed allergy and must avoid a certain allergen.

Animals don't have "ingredient requirements"; they need nutrients, which are contained in ingredients. Thus, a wide variety of ingredients can be combined to produce a nutrient profile appropriate for the pet the diet is intended for. "Descending order" must be evaluated carefully to avoid being misled. *For example*, a meat source like "fresh beef" followed by two or three grain sources may indicate that grain, not meat, is the primary ingredient. This is because the meat contains its natural water content (up to 75% of its weight), which is removed during processing of dry foods.

Pet owners may be concerned to see "phylloquinone," "α-tocopherol," "cobalamin," and "ascorbic acid" listed on their pets' food until they learn that these are the technical names for vitamins K<sub>1</sub>, E, B<sub>12</sub>, and C, respectively. α-Tocopherol is also an antioxidant. Antioxidants are added to foods to balance the nutrient profile and preserve fats; therefore, preservatives are not universally bad for pets and prevent foods from becoming rancid.

Some people wonder are *organic* or *natural* pet foods better? As more pet foods are manufactured to meet the demand for organic and natural ingredients, one needs to understand these terms. AAFCO recently defined "**natural**" as originating from animals or plants. AAFCO has no regulatory definition for "**organic**," which refers to the procedure by which organic ingredients are grown, harvested, and processed. There is no evidence that organic food is more beneficial to animals than nonorganic food. Pet foods that meet the human standard for organic (at least 95% of the content by weight, excluding salt and water, must be organic) may display the USDA organic seal on their packaging. The FDA uses "natural" to describe food and "organic" to describe food in reference to the way it was processed.

Many client questions about pet food result from misunderstandings about particular ingredients. Clients may incorrectly think that by-products are only the undesirable parts of animals, such as hooves, feathers, and beaks. However, by definition in the pet food industry, meat by-products are clean parts other than meat. By-products are an excellent source of amino acids, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Listed below are some of the common ingredients as seen on pet food labels and their definitions:

**Artificial flavor/colour:** Are humanly-contrived additives, used to enhance a product and to appeal to the human eye and add no nutritional value.

**Beef Broth:** Is obtained by cooking beef, including bones and/or muscle, much the same process as making a stock. Beef broth adds moisture and increases the protein and palatability level of food.

**Beef By-products:** Are the non-rendered, clean parts, other than meat, derived from slaughtered cows. It includes, but is not limited to, lungs, spleen, kidneys, brain, livers, blood, bone, partially defatted low temperature fatty tissue, and stomachs and intestines freed of their contents. It **does not** include hair, horns, teeth and hooves.

**Beef Meal:** Is the rendered product from beef tissues. Excluding any added blood, hair, hoof, horn, hide trimmings, manure, stomach and rumen contents, except in such amounts as may occur unavoidably in good processing practices.

**Brewers Rice:** The small fragments of rice kernels that have been separated from larger kernels of milled rice.

**Brown Rice:** Unpolished rice left over after the kernels have been removed.

**Chicken:** The clean combination of flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from the parts or whole carcasses of chicken- exclusive of feathers, heads, feet, and entrails. Chicken is an excellent source of protein.

**Chicken Broth:** Is obtained by cooking chicken, including bones and/or muscle, much the same process as making a stock.

**Chicken By-products:** Consist of the rendered, clean parts of the carcass of slaughtered chickens, such as heads, feet and viscera free from fecal content and foreign matter except in such amounts as might occur unavoidably in good processing practices.

**Chicken By-product Meal:** Consists of the dry, ground, and rendered clean parts of the carcass of slaughtered chickens, such as necks, feet, undeveloped eggs, and intestines -- excluding feathers except in such amounts as might occur unavoidably in good processing practices.

**Chicken Cartilage:** A natural source of glucosamine.

**Chicken Meal:** The dry rendered (cooked down) product from a combination of clean flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from the parts of whole carcasses of chicken -- exclusive of feathers, heads, feet, or entrails. Chicken meal is considered to be the single best source of protein in commercial pet foods.

**Choline Chloride:** A member of the B-complex group of water-soluble vitamins (vitamin B-4).

**Corn Flour:** The fine sized hard flinty portions of ground corn containing little or none of the bran or germ. Whenever flour is part of an ingredient's name, the grain has been processed and some (or all) of the nutritional value has been lost.

**Corn Gluten Meal:** The dried residue from corn after the removal of the larger part of the starch and germ, and the separation of the bran by the process employed in the wet milling manufacture of corn starch or syrup, or by enzymatic treatment of the endosperm.

**Corn Meal:** The entire corn kernel, finely ground. While the whole corn kernel is nutritious, corn is considered to be highly allergenic.

**D-Activated Animal Sterol:** Source of Vitamin D3

**Dicalcium Phosphate:** A calcium salt of phosphoric acid. Dicalcium phosphate provides both calcium and phosphorus, which are vital for building and maintaining strong bones and teeth. Calcium also regulates heartbeat and other muscle contractions and is necessary for proper blood clotting. Phosphorus plays an important part in the body's energy production

**Fish:** Any of various cold-blooded, aquatic vertebrates having gills, commonly fins, and typically an elongated body covered with scales according to Webster's dictionary. Since an unspecified type of fish is used, the ambiguous nature of this ingredient makes it potentially inconsistent.

**Fish Broth:** Obtained by cooking fish and/or other marine animal products, including bones, shells, parts, and/or muscle. Fish broth adds moisture while enhancing the protein level and palatability, rather than diluting it. It contains Omega 3 essential fatty acids, which play a vital role in the structures of cell membranes. Essential fatty acids stimulate growth, benefit skin and hair, influence the inflammatory response and affect the development of the nervous system, including the brain.

**Fish Meal:** Is the clean, rendered (cooked down), dried ground tissue of undecomposed whole fish or fish cuttings, either or both, with or without the extraction of part of the oil. Fish meal is made from unspecified types of fish. While fish meal can be a good source of essential fatty acids and is very palatable for cats, the ambiguous nature of this ingredient makes it potentially inconsistent

**Folic Acid:** Is a Vitamin of the B complex that is water-soluble and essential in animal metabolism. Folic acid is absorbed from the small intestine and small amounts are stored in the liver and other tissues.

**Glucosamine:** A compound that occurs naturally in the cartilage cushioning the joints. Glucosamine, together with chondroitin sulfate, is believed to stimulate the rebuilding of the cartilage matrix and to play a role in the fight against osteoarthritis.

**Glycerine:** Is a colorless, odorless sweet tasting viscous liquid. It is used in some pet foods to retain moisture and enhance palatability.

**Herring:** The clean tissue of undecomposed whole herring or herring cuttings, either or both, with or without the extraction of part of the oils. Herring is an excellent single-source protein. It is also an excellent source of Omega 3 essential fatty acids.

**Herring Meal:** The clean, rendered (cooked down), dried ground tissue of undecomposed whole herring or herring cuttings, either or both, with or without the extraction of part of the oil. Herring meal is a good source of Omega 3 essential fatty acids.

**L-Carnitine:** Carnitine, or L-carnitine, is a vitamin-like compound made in the body from the amino acids lysine and methionine. It is found in animal-based, not plant based, sources of protein. L-carnitine has been used to help with fat metabolism and recent scientific studies shows that it helps reduce weight in overweight dogs and cats.

**Lamb:** Consists of lamb tissue, exclusive of any added blood, hair, hoof, hide trimmings, manure, stomach and rumen contents.

**Lamb By-products:** Consists of the rendered, clean parts of the carcass of slaughtered lambs, such as heads, feet, and viscera, free from fecal content and foreign matter except in such amounts as might occur unavoidably in good processing practices.

**Lamb Meal:** The dry rendered (cooked down) product from lamb tissues, exclusive of any added blood, hair, hoof, hide trimmings, manure, stomach and rumen contents except in such amounts as may occur unavoidably in good processing practices. Lamb meal is simply lamb meat with the moisture removed, making it suitable for use in dry food.

**Lecithin:** A specific phospholipid and the principal constituent of crude phosphatides derived from oil-bearing seeds. Lecithin is essential for normal fatty acid transport within cells. It is obtained chiefly from soybeans, corn and egg yolk.

**Lysine:** An amino acid released in the hydrolysis of many common proteins

**Ocean Fish:** Undecomposed whole fish or cuttings, with or without part of the fish oils. Ocean fish can be comprised of any type of fish, with constantly changing proportions and questionable nutritional value.

**Ocean Fish Meal:** Undecomposed whole fish or cuttings. Ocean fish meal is fish that has been ground or otherwise reduced in particle size. Ocean fish can be comprised of any type of fish, with constantly changing proportions and questionable nutritional value.

**Pork By-products:** Consists of the rendered, clean parts of the carcass of slaughtered pig, such as heads, feet, viscera, free from fecal content and foreign matter except in such amounts as might occur unavoidably in good processing practices.

**Pork Meal:** is the dry rendered (cooked down) product from a combination of clean flesh and skin (with or without accompanying bone), derived from the parts of whole carcasses of pigs or a combination thereof -- exclusive of head, feet or entrails.

**Rice Gluten Meal:** The dried residue from rice after the removal of the larger part of the starch and germ, and separation of the bran by the process employed in the wet milling manufacture of rice starch or syrup, or by enzymatic treatment of the endosperm.

**Salmon:** A marine and freshwater food fish high in protein and Omega fatty acid. There is currently no official AAFCO definition for salmon. Salmon is an excellent single-source protein. It is also an excellent source of Omega 3 essential fatty acids, which play a vital role in the structures of cell membranes.

**Salmon Meal:** The clean, rendered, dried ground tissue of undecomposed salmon or salmon cuttings, either or both, with or without the extraction of part of the oil. Salmon fishmeal is a good source of essential fatty acids and is a palatable ingredient for cats.

**Sodium Ascorbate:** A common form of Vitamin C.

**Sodium Chloride:** The chemical name for common salt.

**Sodium Phosphate:** s a naturally occurring substance that is important in every cell in the body. The majority of phosphorus in the body is found in the bones.

**Sorbic Acid:** A white crystalline carboxylic acid used as a preservative.

**Taurine:** The 11th essential amino acid required by cats. Insufficient levels of taurine can lead to blindness and cardiac problems in cats. Meat is naturally high in taurine.

**Whitefish:** The clean tissue of undecomposed whole whitefish and/or whitefish cuttings, any of several deep water fishes of the family Coregonidae. Whitefish is an excellent single-source protein. It is also an excellent source of Omega 3 essential fatty acids, which play a vital role in the structures of cell membranes. Essential fatty acids stimulate growth, benefit skin and hair, influence the inflammatory response and affect the development of the nervous system, including the brain.

**Tuna Meal:** The clean tissue of undecomposed whole tuna or tuna cuttings. Tuna meal is tuna that has been ground or otherwise reduced in particle size.

**Turkey:** The clean combination of flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from the parts or whole carcasses of turkey or a combination of thereof - exclusive of feathers, heads, feet, and entrails. Turkey is an excellent source of highly digestible protein.

**Turkey Broth:** Obtained by cooking turkey bones, parts, and/or muscle tissue. Turkey broth adds moisture and flavor to canned foods and is a good source of fat and protein.

**Turkey By-products:** The rendered clean parts of carcasses of slaughtered poultry such as heads, feet, viscera, free from fecal content and foreign matter except in such trace amounts as might occur unavoidably in good factory practice.

**Turkey Meal:** The dry rendered (cooked down) product from a combination of clean flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from the parts of whole carcasses of turkeys -- exclusive of feathers, heads, feet, or entrails. Turkey meal is an excellent source of protein.

**Venison:** Consists of flesh and skin, exclusive of any added blood, hair, hoof, hide trimmings, manure, and stomach or rumen contents. Venison is a very lean, low fat source of protein.

6. **"A Complete and Balanced Diet"** indicates that a food has all the recognized and required nutrients in the proper proportions, when fed appropriately.

In a feeding trial, a product is fed to a specific number of cats or dogs for a minimum of 6 months to determine whether it provides adequate nutrition. By conducting feeding tests, pet food companies ensure that animals in a particular life stage (i.e., gestation, lactation, growth, adult maintenance) will obtain proper nutrition from a food. Feeding trials also provide some assurance of palatability and the availability of nutrients.

When a food is formulated by calculation or chemical analysis, the nutrients meet the maximum or minimum levels established by AAFCO. Because the finished product is not fed to animals, availability and palatability are not assessed.

Beware if the package states the food supports "**all life stages.**" The product likely contains excessive levels of some nutrients necessary for the most demanding life stage, which is growth. *For example,* it might contain higher levels of protein and calcium for puppies, but those levels are inappropriate for an adult or senior dog.

## **What is AAFCO?**

AAFCO is an acronym for the Association of American Feed Control Officials. AAFCO is a non-profit organization that sets standards for both animal feeds and pet foods in the United States and Canada.

## **What are AAFCO pet food nutrient profiles?**

In order for a pet food to be marketed as “complete and balanced”, it must meet the nutritional standards established by AAFCO. These nutritional adequacy standards are defined by two nutrient profiles based on your pets’ stage of life...

- Adult maintenance
- Growth and reproduction

## **What does growth and reproduction mean?**

Dog foods rated for “growth and reproduction” are designed for puppies and pregnant or lactating females.

## **How can a manufacturer claim a particular product meets one of the two AAFCO nutrient standards?**

In order for any pet food company to claim a product is “complete and balanced” for a specific life stage, that claim must first have been validated in one of two ways...

- Laboratory analysis only
- Laboratory analysis plus actual feeding trials

## **How can a consumer know which method was used to verify AAFCO nutritional adequacy?**

The *first* method uses laboratory analysis of a sample to verify the food meets AAFCO nutritional standards. The label will read... “*(Name of product) is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Cat/Dog Food Nutrient Profiles*”

The *second* not only uses laboratory analysis but also proves that nutritional adequacy by conducting actual feeding trials with real cats/dogs. This type of adequacy statement ought to probably read... “*Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that (name of product) provides complete and balanced nutrition*”

## **What if a pet food cannot meet either of the AAFCO nutrient profiles?**

Any product that cannot meet either the AAFCO adult maintenance or growth and reproduction standards must state... “*This product is intended for intermittent or supplemental feeding only*” In other words, a product not intended for long-term use.