

PODCAST EPISODE 5 - The Pet Food Fallacy; what's in YOUR pet's bowl?

Hello everybody, and welcome to another edition of the Pet Wellness Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Mike. Today I want to talk a bit about pet nutrition and what information you can learn from reading a pet food label.

You know, nutrition is a very hot topic that I'm very passionate about. After all, it was said centuries ago, "Let food be thy medicine." So many problems that I saw in general practice stemmed at least partially from nutrition. And that's why I've made nutrition a focus of my research in the past decade, and I really want to share that research with you today.

The problem isn't that pet food has severe nutrient deficiencies. Really bad diseases like rickets and protein malnutrition that occurred more often many decades ago, are infrequent today. Thankfully, today, if there are deficiencies in a pet food, it is likely because the food was tested before processing to show that there were enough ingredients, but perhaps wasn't tested after the food was cooked and extruded into its final form. And that is why later in this podcast, we will be discussing the importance of knowing what company has produced the food that you're feeding your pet. What I see more today, are problems associated with an excess of nutrients, which may seem odd, but you'll understand what I mean when I get there.

So, before we dive in, I'm not going to share with you the diets that I like or dislike because I'm not here to advertise or criticize any food companies. I'm here with one purpose and one purpose only; to educate you on good nutrition for your pet. It's going to be up to you to then take what you learned today and select the right food for your pet. I like this approach because it shows no bias for things like brand ingredients or even cost. There's something out there for everybody, and you, as a pet wellness advocate, will hopefully be able to formulate your own plan with the information I'm going to share with you today.

This podcast is centered around an article that I read a few years ago that was really disturbing to me, but now I can finally chat about it on this podcast. It was an article in the 2018 edition of the Canadian Veterinary Journal and the title was "Many Canadian Dog and Cat Foods Failed to Comply with a Guaranteed Analysis Reported on Pet Food Packages." I'll explain what a guaranteed analysis is

in a moment. That was a powerful title. And although we'll be talking about the Canadian pet food market based on this article, if you live in the US or in any other country, there will be things that I will be saying that will apply to your situation as well. So please hang in there. I want to mention that this study didn't include foods from the three biggest global pet food companies, and it only included companies that produced and sold pet foods in Canada. So, there are no pet foods in the study that were imported from the US, which, by the way, makes up almost 50% of pet foods in Canada. So, here's what they found in the study. Only nine out of 27 pet foods tested met all nutrient content claims listed in their guaranteed analysis! And what that means is that 67% of Canadian pet foods examined in this study didn't meet 100% of their nutrient claims, which is kind of scary. So, with that in mind, I wanted to share with you my six rules of thumb when looking at pet foods in a pet store or online. And these are kind of big-picture rules of thumb. I have so much information to share about nutrition, so I really wanted this first podcast on nutrition to be a general overview. I will certainly dive into each rule of thumb in much greater detail, either in future podcasts or on my blog, which is available on my website at <https://www.petwellnessadvocate.com/>. Or for those of you who like shorter URLs www.pwa.vet.

Rule of thumb number one is just a statement that in Canada, there are no strict regulations or enforcement to produce dog or cat food. In fact, regulations in Canada are at the federal level and often involve the FDA. The other thing you need to know is that regulations are much less rigorous here in Canada than they are in the US. And what that means is that you can glean a lot more from a US pet food label than you can from a Canadian pet food label. Which is sad for me as a Canadian veterinarian, especially when I see how many of my clients have made decisions on what to feed their pet just by what they read on a pet food label. And this is also why so many mom-and-pop style pet food companies have emerged in Canada in the past ten years. You used to be able to go into a pet store and see ten or so major brands. Today there are literally hundreds. And the sad thing for me, as a veterinarian who is passionate about pet nutrition is that instead of competing on the merits of the nutrition they provide, some companies compete on marketing buzzwords that excite pet owners like yourself, but only frustrate veterinary nutritionists. I remember the standard sarcastic quote that I used to use with my own clients that was intended to be funny, but really was meant to express my frustration at some of these new buzzwords. I would say things like, "These diets are gluten-free, by-product-free, grain-free, research free!". My real goal was to

make people realize that these new fancy buzzwords had nothing to do with the quality of the diet. They were just words used to impress consumers.

Okay, let's move on. My next five rules of thumb are going to show you things that you should either avoid or look for on a bag of pet food. Rule of thumb number two; avoid using the guaranteed analysis that's on every bag of pet food to gain any information on the quality or the true composition of the food. So, what is a guaranteed analysis? Well, in a nutshell, it's a window into the level of nutrients in a food. And if you go shopping and look at any label, whether it's your bag of milk or even a chocolate bar, they all have a guaranteed analysis, except it'll likely say Nutritional Facts instead of Guaranteed Analysis. And that guaranteed analysis is a lot more comprehensive and specific than anything we see in the pet world. You can see how many calories are in the food. You can even get the number of grams of each individual nutrient, like the number of grams of fat or the number of grams of protein. And they'll often provide the percent RDA, which is the recommended daily allowance. So, what's different about the guaranteed analysis in pet food? Well, there's two major ones.

First, on pet food, the guaranteed analysis only must list four major components; that's its protein, fat, fibre, and moisture. Thankfully, a lot of companies add more than just the four and will add certain vitamins and minerals. But that's not the real problem. The real problem is that everything is expressed as a minimum percentage or a maximum percentage. Not true numbers like we see in the human side. So as an example, if a pet food says that there's a minimum of 10% fat, what does that mean? Well, it might mean that a pet food has 11% fat or 14% fat. We really don't know. But I'll tell you what it means to you as a pet owner. It means that you're not going to be able to compare pet food A to pet food B based on the guaranteed analysis because you really can't make those assumptions from just minimums and maximums. The second problem with a guaranteed analysis is that they're all reported on an as-fed basis and not a dry matter basis. So, what do both of those terms mean? Well, as-fed basis is essentially as-fed to the dog or as-fed to the cat, which essentially is the entire food, including water. Whereas dry matter basis is everything that's in the food with water taken away. Why is that important? Well, the easiest way to explain it is by giving you an example. The other day I went into a pet store, and I looked for a bag of the most popular cat food that's available today and has been for many years. And again, it doesn't matter what the name of it is, but I picked up the bag of the dry and a can of the wet food

of the same exact brand. Well, on the dry food, it said, 'Minimum 30% protein'. And on the can it said, 'Minimum, 9% protein'. Now, most people would say, "Wow, that's a pretty big difference between the dry food and the wet food! I guess the dry food has more protein." Well, the fact of the matter is that's not the case. In fact, the opposite is true. So how do I know that? Well, what I did is I calculated how much protein is in the food on a dry matter basis. And I want to teach you that calculation right now. And I just want to say for those of you that are not good with math, I apologize in advance. There's going to be a little math in this. However, the great thing about a podcast is you can always go back and listen to it again.

So, bear with me. Here we go. So, I looked at the dry food and the moisture level was 12%. And when I grabbed the can, the moisture level was 80%. Well, that's a big, huge difference in terms of water content. So, let's figure out how to calculate protein on a dry matter basis. So, for the dry food, you take 100 minus 12, which is 88. It's 88% dry food because it's 12% moisture. And all I did was take the protein divided by the 88% dry matter, and I got 34% protein, a little bit more. Then I went over to the wet food. Remember how I said it's 80% moisture? Well, $100 - 80$ is 20%. That's the dry matter in the food. So now I take the protein, divide that by the dry matter, and suddenly now I have a protein level of 45%, which is a lot higher than the dry food at 34%. So, to say it a little differently, all you really must do is take the number 100, subtract the moisture in the food, and the number you get is the percent of dry matter, and then just divide the percent protein or percent fat or percent fibre by that number and you will get the percentage of that nutrient on a dry matter basis. So, if you end up calculating everything on a dry matter basis, you're getting a much more accurate number. However, it's still a minimum. So, although now you're comparing apples to apples by removing the water, you should still never use the guaranteed analysis to make any decisions on what pet food to buy.

Rule of thumb number three; avoid using the ingredient list to determine if a pet food is healthy or not. And why is that? Well, there's two reasons. Number one is that everything in the ingredient list is listed in order of weight, and companies will use that to their advantage so they can move ingredients that they know the consumers are going to like to the front of the line. And you see all those commercials where companies talk about having chicken or beef or lamb as the first ingredient. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? But one thing I want you to realize about pet food is when they list meat as the first ingredient that often includes

water and bones as well, which makes it quite heavy, while vitamins and minerals, which are very important for your pet sit at the very bottom of the list because they're not very heavy, things like calcium and phosphorus and potassium. I'm not saying at all that having meat as the first ingredient is bad. It's actually very good. I just want you as the consumer to realize that there's a reason why certain ingredients are listed 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th. And it's not just by chance. Number two, as much as dogs are now omnivores like humans, and omnivores, by the way, are animals that can eat both plant and animal matter; they're truly carnivores by nature. So, ingredients like peas and lentils and blueberries and sweet potatoes are not typical ingredients in a dog's diet. So, I'm not saying that those ingredients are bad. All I'm saying is that if you look at the ingredients and the pet food looks honestly good enough for you to eat, don't just assume that it is, because really nothing on the ingredient list tells you anything about the quantity or quality of that ingredient that you're looking at. So, I'm sure by now you're thinking, 'Well, you know what? You've told me what I should avoid when looking at a bag of food. Is there anything that I can find that is useful on a bag of food?' Well, the answer is yes, and that's what we're going to address right now.

Rule of thumb number four; if you remember my first rule of thumb, that there are no strict regulations for the nutrient content of dog and cat food. Well, it's obvious that some companies see this as an advantage, as they don't have to account for the quality of their food. However, there are so many companies out there that really pride themselves on their quality and seek to set a standard, even if there isn't one. For example, wouldn't it be nice if a company came out with a car that had eight or ten airbags, even though, let's say the requirement by law was only two? The key is to find a company like that. And when it comes to pet food companies, you certainly can. And the first thing I would recommend you look for is a pet food company that has a nutritional adequacy statement on the bag. Specifically, it's referred to as an AAFCO statement. So AAFCO is an acronym that stands for the Association of American Food Control Officials, which really applies in the US and Canada. The Canadian equivalent of AAFCO is the Pet Food Association of Canada or PFAC. However, members of PFAC manufacture to the same nutritional standards set out by AAFCO and often follow AAFCO's labelling guidelines. So, AAFCO really sets the standard for pet foods in Canada. And I will leave a link in the show notes to their website where there are lots of great tips for consumers like yourself on how to interpret pet food labels and what to watch out for. Now, AAFCO doesn't regulate or inspect or approve or even certify pet food.

However, they do provide important standard ingredient definitions and nutrition requirements for pet foods, and that is based entirely on input from animal feed specialists. So where can you find an AAFCO statement on a bag of pet food and what does it typically say? Well, in my experience, it's most often found on the side of the bag, but I've also seen it on the back of a bag and it's typically in the bottom corner. And in 90% to 95% of situations, you'll see one of the following two statements, which always ends with the life stage of the pet. Something that we'll talk about next.

Number one; product X, is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO dog or cat food nutrient profiles. Number two; animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that product X provides complete and balanced nutrition. If you see either of these two statements on a bag of food, it tells you that the nutritional adequacy standards established by AAFCO have been met or exceeded, which is extremely important if you're looking for a good food to feed your furry friend. Now, if you ask me which statement, I prefer, I will easily say the second one. The first statement just says that they formulated the food using AAFCO standards. In the second statement, they've taken it to the next step and done animal feeding trials using AAFCO procedures. And by the way, these trials are very expensive. So, what this says to me is that this company is committed to the best nutrition for your pet.

Rule of thumb number five; the life stage of your pet. I mentioned this earlier because at the end of every AAFCO statement, they talk about the life stage of your pet. Now, AAFCO has three life stage categories. They used to only have two, but now they have three. The first one is growth and reproduction. The second is adult maintenance, and the final one is all life stages. Let's go over each one briefly. The AAFCO life stage, growth and reproduction is designed for three purposes. For puppies or kittens that are growing, for mothers that are pregnant, and finally for mothers who have had puppies or kittens and are now lactating. The only comment I would make about this category is if you have a large breed puppy, it's not enough to just find an AAFCO statement for growth and reproduction. You want to make sure that it is designed for large breed puppies because small breed puppies and large breed puppies have different nutritional requirements. The adult maintenance life stage is self-explanatory. Essentially, if you have any adult or senior dog or cat, you should be looking for an AAFCO statement that has adult maintenance on it. And finally, the newest AAFCO life stage category, all life stages.

And these foods are designed to satisfy every single life stage, whether you're a puppy or kitten, an adult dog or cat or a senior dog or cat. And this brings us back to the very beginning of the podcast where I mentioned the situation where you might have excesses in nutrients. Let me explain that if your bag of food has an AAFCO statement that says all life stages, it must satisfy the minimum requirements of each life stage. And the hardest life stage to satisfy is the puppy and kitten stage, because they require much higher levels of nutrients than adult or senior dogs and cats. For example, puppies and kittens need much higher levels of fat and protein to not only sustain growth but also to ensure that their organs and tissues develop properly. They also require a lot more calcium for bone growth. So, what that means is that all life stage diets must at least satisfy that minimum requirement for puppies and kittens, which means that all life stage diets are typically higher in fat, higher in protein, and higher in calcium. So, what do you think that means when an adult or senior pet eats a food that's higher in fat, higher in protein, and higher in calcium? Well, it's hard to answer that question because it depends on a lot of factors, like how long they're on the diet for and what's their lifestyle. Do they live a sedentary lifestyle where they're chilling on the couch most of the day, or are they a high-strung breed that exercises all the time? I would be cautious about using an all-life stage diet in two scenarios. Number one is a pet that is sedentary in their lifestyle. If your pet doesn't exercise regularly, the only thing that's going to happen if you feed them a diet that's higher in fat and higher in protein is they're just going to gain weight and eventually become obese. Number two is any senior pet. Let me give you a human example to illustrate what I'm talking about. When you're 18 years of age, you can sit down to a double cheeseburger, large order of fries and a milkshake and get away with it. Whoever is listening to this podcast that's over 40 years of age knows full well that if you eat a meal like that, there's going to be consequences and should never be attempted unless you're close to a washroom. That's because as we age, our bodies have much less ability to digest fats, and in some situations, a high-fat diet can lead to some serious consequences. This is particularly true for adult dogs. I've seen many dogs on high-fat diets get a condition known as pancreatitis, which is an inflammation of the pancreas. It's a very painful condition that can lead to vomiting, diarrhea, and dehydration, which is the reason why I would not recommend an all-life stage pet food for senior pets.

And finally, rule of thumb number six; it's important that you get to know who is the manufacturer of the pet food that you're feeding your pet. And here are four quick tips that you can use to find the best quality food companies. Number

one, they should really own the plant where the food is manufactured. Number two, make sure they practice strict quality control measures. Number three, make sure they employ at least one full-time qualified nutritionist. They should have a Ph.D. in animal nutrition, not human nutrition or they should be a board-certified veterinary nutritionist. And lastly number four they should test their diets via advocate feeding trials and not just formulate their pet foods.

That's a wrap. I really hope that I've provided a few big picture points for you on how to properly read a pet food label. Again, if you check out the AAFCO site that I've left in the show notes, you can find a lot more tips on how to choose the best nutrition for your pet.

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Have a wonderful day and remember our pets deserve our best.