



Your Pet's Diet

A high quality nutritional program for your pet keeps it happy, healthy, and in peak condition throughout its life. Proper nutrition is essential for its long-term health and happiness.

LIFE-STAGE NUTRITION. It is important to regularly review your pet's current nutritional requirements. Your pet's nutritional needs change with each life stage. The nutritional requirements for a growing puppy or kitten are very different from those of a normal, active adult pet. The same holds true for major differences in mid-life adult pets and senior pets. Also the lifestyle of your pet will dictate its needs. A working dog, pregnant pet, and less active pet all have very different nutritional requirements.

READING THE PET FOOD LABEL. There are major differences in pet foods. The label can provide you with important information about the quality of the food you are buying. For proper nutrition, the diet must provide the proper balance of the **five basic nutrient categories: protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals.** The label will list all ingredients in descending order *by weight*. The protein source will probably be the first ingredient listed and is an important indicator as to the overall quality of the diet. **Higher-quality pet foods will have animal meat as the major protein source.** Quality protein sources include chicken, meat meal, fish meal, and/or dried whole egg. *Lesser-quality pet foods often use plant-origin proteins, such as soybeans.* Your pet's digestive system can absorb meat proteins much more efficiently than plant-origin proteins. You want to feed a high-quality protein because it is highly digestible and provides your pet with the nutrients it needs to carry out normal body functions and to produce a strong-boned, well-toned and muscled body, along with a healthy, shiny coat.

In addition to the label listing all the ingredients, you will also see a listing of the *guaranteed analysis*. This is the percentage of crude protein, crude fat, fiber, and moisture that are present in the diet. These percentages will change significantly with each life stage and your pet's lifestyle. It is important to feed the right food for each life stage of your pet.

Finally, all quality foods follow the recommendations put forth by the *Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO)*. The regulations controlling pet food are far less protective than those for human food. Therefore, AAFCO was founded as a group to set the standards by which pet food company's should develop, test, and produce their foods. Companies are not required to follow these regulations and not all choose to do so. Therefore, the food's label should state that the food's quality was tested following AAFCO's standards. If this is not stated on the label, the food is definitely of questionable quality.

Water is also an essential nutrient that must be available to the pet. Fresh, clean water should always be available. Canned foods contain about 80% water whereas dry foods contain about 10% moisture. Pets eating canned food therefore get more of their water requirements from the food than those fed dry foods.

PETS DON'T NEED A VARIABLE DIET. Switching brands of pet foods frequently will make your pet a much more finicky eater as well as lead to many more digestive upsets. Vomiting and/or diarrhea are common consequences of abrupt changes in the pet's diet. If you do change diets, it is important to do it SLOWLY over a 5-10 day period. Begin by adding a small amount of the new food and gradually increasing its proportion in the total diet while decreasing the proportion of the diet being replaced.

