

A French Bulldog with black and white fur is standing in a pet store aisle. The dog is looking up at shelves filled with various pet food products. The background is slightly blurred, showing more shelves and a person in the distance. A purple rectangular box with a white border is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title text.

Tips to Select a Quality Pet Food

Pet food is VERY different than human food; the manufacturing process, ingredients, even the names of ingredients that we are familiar with (for human food) does not apply to pet food. Finding a quality and affordable pet food takes a little bit of understanding of the 'language' of pet food (regulations).



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The BEST pet foods:

- include food (not feed) quality ingredients
- include organic and/or non-GMO ingredients
- include meats sourced from certified humanely raised animals
- are minimally processed
- include minimal supplements (balanced thru food)
- perform consistent safety and nutritional testing



There are two classifications of pet foods: human grade (food grade) and feed grade. The classification of human grade is disclosed on the pet food label, feed grade classification is not disclosed to consumers.

Human Grade Pet Food

Pet foods with the words "Human Grade" on the label provide pet owners with a guarantee that all ingredients and supplements are human edible, and manufacturing processes meet the same requirements as your food (human food). Human Grade pet foods are formulated for pets, but every aspect of these pet foods are required to meet the same quality and safety standards as human food.

Unless a pet food meets all legal requirements of human grade they are classified as feed grade.

Human Grade

Legal Definition

"Every ingredient and the resulting product are stored, handled, processed, and transported in a manner that is consistent and compliant with regulations for current good manufacturing practices (cGMPs) for human edible foods as specified in 21 CFR (Code of Federal Regulations) Part 117."

Feed Grade Pet Food

Feed grade pet foods are NOT required to use human edible ingredients, are NOT required to use human edible supplements, and are NOT required to be manufactured per human food safety standards. In general, feed grade pet foods are NOT food -- they are feed (held to similar standards as cattle feed and chicken feed).

However, there are some feed grade pet foods that voluntarily manufacture their products to the same safety standards as human foods, including using 100% or majority human edible ingredients. One example would be a pet food classified as feed grade due to not being manufactured in a licensed human food facility choosing to meet all human food safety standards including all human edible ingredients.

While human grade pet foods are allowed to be labeled as such, informing consumers to quality of ingredients and manufacturing - regulations do not require feed grade pet foods to disclose their grade. Feed grade pet foods often mislead pet owners to their quality with marketing styles similar to human food marketing, alluding to a higher quality than they are.



Styles of Pet Food

Dry or Kibble

Kibble is defined as a process: *“Cracked or crushed baked dough, or extruded feed that has been cooked prior to or during the extrusion process.”*

The most common manufacturing method for kibble pet foods is extrusion. Extrusion is a manufacturing process where dough is pressed under pressure through a mechanism that cuts the pieces into the desired shape and size.

Some kibble pet foods are baked (not extruded). And some kibble pet foods are classified as air dried - similar process to baking.

All extruded kibble pet foods are feed grade. Baked or air dried kibble could be human grade or feed grade.

Can

Canned is defined as a process: *“a term applied to a feed which has been processed, packaged, sealed, and sterilized for preservation in cans or similar containers.”* Similar containers to cans would be Tetra Pak pet foods. These styles of pet foods are commonly cooked in the container.

Canned pet foods could meet legal requirements of human grade, most do not. Tetra Pak pet foods could be human grade or feed grade.

Raw

Raw is legally defined as *“Food in its natural or crude state not having been subjected to heat in the course of preparation as food.”*

Some raw pet foods are treated with HPP (high pressure processing) to control pathogens.

Raw pet foods are not permitted to make a human grade label claim due to it's raw state (must be ready-to-eat per human food regulations), however some raw pet food manufacturers meet all requirements of human grade.

Freeze Dried Dehydrated

Dehydrated is defined as a process: *“having been freed of moisture by thermal means.”*

The process of freeze dried pet food is not legally defined.

Both styles could be human grade or feed grade.

Cooked

This style of pet food is different from canned pet foods in that the products are sold frozen or refrigerated.

This style can be human grade or feed grade.

Veterinary Diets

Veterinary diets, also known as prescription pet foods, are the only style of pet food allowed to make the claim to cure or treat disease (a drug claim).

The FDA gives these pet diets special permission to make a drug claim without requiring clinical trials/testing to evidence safety and effectiveness.

Veterinary diets can be human grade or feed grade.



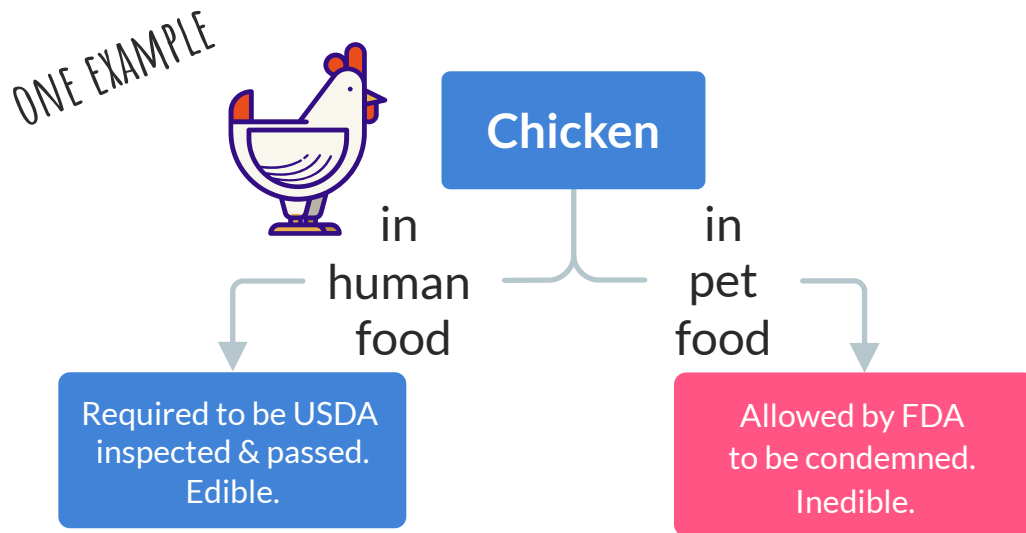
Ingredients

All ingredients used in pet foods are required to be approved for the species (cat or dog) through the AAFCO approval process or acknowledged as GRAS (generally recognized as safe) by the FDA.

ONE OF THE MOST CONFUSING THINGS ABOUT PET FOOD...

When 'Real' Chicken Is Not Chicken.

Even though the names of pet food ingredient are identical to human food ingredient names, they are NOT the same. Pet food ingredients have a separate legal definition that is very different than a food ingredient of the same name in human food.



Chicken in your food (human food) is required by legal definition to be USDA inspected and passed, conforms to the standards of the Poultry Products Inspection Act. However, chicken in pet food - having a separate legal definition - is not required to be USDA inspected and passed, chicken in pet food is allowed by the FDA and state authorities to be sourced from condemned chicken.



Every ingredient (not just chicken) in pet food is allowed by FDA to be a lesser/inferior quality than the ingredient of the same name in human food.

The FDA and state authorities expressly allow inferior quality ingredients in pet food through enforcement discretion. The FDA states:

"We do not believe that the use of diseased animals or animals that have died otherwise than by slaughter to make animal food poses a safety concern, and we intend to exercise enforcement discretion."

Every meat/animal protein ingredient used in pet food is allowed by FDA to be sourced from diseased animals, condemned animal material, or animals that died in the field (example of 'otherwise than by slaughter').

There is NO required disclosure for consumers on pet food labels.

Pet owners are not informed if ingredients in their pet's food are human grade or feed grade.

Rendered Ingredients

The FDA defines rendering/a renderer as:

"any firm or individual that processes slaughter byproducts; animals unfit for human consumption, including carcasses of dead cattle; or meat scraps."

The pet food industry states rendered ingredients *"make up 40% to 60% of most finished kibble formulations for cats and dogs."*

Rendered pet food ingredients are listed on labels as 'meal' animal protein ingredients such as Chicken Meal or Lamb Meal. Fats such as Chicken Fat are also rendered ingredients. Almost all rendered ingredients are feed grade; the exception would be human grade fats.

Rendered ingredients are highly processed, cooked prior to the cooking of the pet food and cooked again in the pet food manufacturing process.



Minimally Processed

The link of ultra-processed foods to disease is well documented.

A study published in the Royal Society Open Science Journal found: *"Dogs eating dry food had significantly higher GlycA levels than dogs consuming other diet types."*

Higher GlycA levels are linked to inflammatory diseases, cancer and heart disease – VERY similar to human food research for humans consuming a diet high in ultra-processed foods.

The globally recognized NOVA classification system defines ultra-processed foods to include fractions of whole foods, pre-cooked ingredients, colors, flavors, and foods subject to extrusion.

The NOVA system applied to pet food:

Minimally Processed Pet Food Styles

- Air Dried/Baked Kibble
- Cooked
- Canned
- Dehydrated
- Freeze Dried
- Raw

Minimally Processed Pet Food Ingredients

- Whole Meats such as:
 - Chicken
 - Lamb
 - Beef
- Whole Ingredients such as:
 - Corn
 - Peas
 - Rice

Ultra-processed Pet Food Styles

- Extruded Kibble

Ultra-processed Pet Food Ingredients

- Pre-processed rendered ingredients such as:
 - Chicken Meal
 - Lamb Meal
 - By-product Meal
- Fractioned ingredients such as:
 - Corn Protein Meal
 - Pea Starch
 - Brewers Rice
- Food dyes such as Caramel Color
- Flavoring ingredients such as Natural Flavor



Understand what the label is telling you

The Name of the Pet Food

Per pet food regulations, a pet food with the word **FORMULA, DINNER, PLATTER, ENTREE, or RECIPE** in the name is required to include a minimum of 10% of the named food ingredient (of the pet food total weight)

10%

A pet food with the word (or symbol) **AND** in the name (between two ingredients) is required to be a minimum of 3% of each named food ingredient (of the pet food total weight)

3%

A pet food with the word **FLAVOR** in the name is not required to contain any of the named ingredient (zero)

0%

3%

A pet food with the word **WITH** in the name is required to be a minimum 3% of the named ingredient (of the pet food total weight)

Nutritional Adequacy

Regulations require pet foods to be labeled as '**Complete & Balanced**' (also labeled as 'Complete') or '**Supplemental**'.

Complete pet foods are required to include a Nutritional Adequacy Statement on the label. This statement tells the pet owner if the pet food was formulated per AAFCO Nutrient Profiles or formulated per a manufacturer feeding trial.

Complete pet foods are formulated to provide your pet with all required nutrients, Supplemental pet foods do not provide all required nutrients.



Beyond the Label

Who regulates pet food?

Pet food is regulated on a state and federal level. In most US states, the State Department of Agriculture is the regulatory agency governing products sold within state boundaries. The FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine is the agency responsible for regulating pet foods nationally.

What is a Nutrient Profile?

There are particular nutrients that are needed by cats and dogs from their diet, examples being protein, calcium, vitamin D. These nutrients have been compiled in a 'profile' that defines the minimum amount needed for each species. Nutrients can be provided by food ingredients and/or supplements added to the pet food. AAFCO's Nutrient Profiles are established on a per 1,000 calorie basis; for example an adult cat food is required to contain a minimum of 65 grams of protein per 1,000 calories. The goal of these nutrients per 1,000 calorie basis is for your pet to receive the proper amount (neither deficient or excess) based on the amount of pet food your cat or dog eats. Thus, the feeding directions on pet food labels are required to provide pet owners a recommended feeding amount that would assure the pet is receiving sufficient nutrients for a balanced diet.

Hint: if you are providing your pet with more pet food OR less pet food than the recommended feeding amount, ask the manufacturer if the amount you are providing your pet will not result in any nutrient deficiencies or nutrient excesses.

There are two nutrient profiles for dogs, and two nutrient profiles for cats; Adult Maintenance and All Life Stages. The Adult Maintenance Cat or Dog profiles are – as the name implies – is for adult animals. The All Life Stages Cat or Dog profiles are suitable for puppies, adult, and senior pets.

Who/What is AAFCO?

AAFCO stands for Association of American Feed Control Officials. AAFCO has no regulatory authority as an agency, however its members do. Members of AAFCO are representatives of state regulatory agencies, with some participation by FDA representatives. AAFCO approves and legally defines pet food/livestock feed ingredients, has established Nutrient Profiles for pet foods, and has established labeling requirements of pet foods.

What is a Guaranteed Analysis?

Every pet food label is required to provide a Guaranteed Analysis. This information is very basic, providing pet owners with a guarantee from the manufacturer the pet food contains a minimum of protein and fat, and a maximum of fiber and moisture. Protein and fat are stated as "crude" which is the method of calculation of the protein/fat, not a reference to the quality of the protein/fat. Some pet foods include other guarantees in this section on a voluntary basis (the only required guarantees are protein, fat, fiber and moisture).

How pet foods are determined to be Complete and Balanced

Pet food manufacturers have two methods to determine nutritional adequacy for cats and dogs. One is to formulate the pet food to meet an AAFCO Nutrient Profile. The other is for the manufacturer to perform a feeding trial (requirements established by AAFCO). There is no evidence that pet foods are better/healthier when formulated by feeding trial or by Nutrient Profiles.



Questions to ask the pet food manufacturer

Do you source human grade or feed grade ingredients, including supplements?

Some manufacturers will respond that ingredients are classified as feed grade due to pet food manufacturing standards. This is an accurate response. Pet food regulations state that only pet foods manufactured in a licensed human food facility can officially be classified as human grade. When a human grade ingredient enters a licensed pet food facility it is officially classified as feed grade. However, your question asks what classification of ingredient do they source? Such as, with meats - are the meats USDA inspected and passed (equivalent to human grade)?

Are ingredients consistently organic or non-GMO?

The more organic/non-GMO ingredients, the better.

Are meats/animal protein ingredients sourced from certified humanely raised animals?

Certified humanely raised animals provide you with 3rd party verification the meats in this pet food were sourced from animals that were not 'factory farmed'.

What tests are performed on incoming ingredients? What tests are performed on finished pet foods? How often are these tests performed?

Proper testing gives pet owners assurances the pet food is safe for your cat or dog. With ingredients, some manufacturers required the supplier to test ingredients prior to each shipment, providing a Certificate of Analysis with each order. Some manufacturers validate supplier testing with their own laboratory analysis (typically once a year and with any new supplier).

With pet foods, some pet food manufacturers have a 'test and hold' program, where all batches of pet foods are held until safety tests results are received. Test and hold provides pet owners with optimal safety.

Also with pet foods, it is optimal for manufacturers to perform a full nutritional analysis on each food, optimally once a year. Some manufacturers calculate the nutrients in their formulas, based on generic testing of ingredients (often sourced from an antiquated USDA nutrient database). However the nutrients in food ingredients can change depending on the supplier or growing conditions. Pet foods that perform a full nutritional laboratory analysis on their pet foods are giving pet owners assurances their products meet nutritional needs.



A few more considerations

Company History

It is recommended to look over the recalls previously experienced by a pet food manufacturer. All recalls are NOT the same. Some recalls are the result of the manufacturer failing to follow basic safety protocols. As example, many pet foods have issued recalls for excess vitamin D (deadly to pets), when simple testing could have prevented them. Looking at this type of company history tells you whether you can trust your pet's life with this food.

Packaging

Some manufacturers use BPA free packaging, and some use recyclable packaging. Both are optimal. (And make sure you actually recycle it!)

Marketing

Some pet food brands use misleading marketing to sell their products, using images of grilled or roasted meats on labels or websites when none of the ingredients in the pet foods are similar to what is displayed. If you are considering a pet food with images like this, ask the manufacturer: Is the beef grilled prior to making the pet food? Is the chicken actually roasted? Are you including chicken breast meat in the pet food as indicated on your label/website?

Pet foods are often marketed as "Made with Real Chicken" or "Real Beef is the #1 ingredient". The use of the word 'Real' implies the pet food includes the same quality of chicken or beef you are familiar with in your food (human grade). However, most of these marketing claims are simply marketing - not factual. If a pet food makes these claims, ask the company what does "Real" mean? Ask if the chicken or beef (or other protein) is human grade or feed grade.

Style

The style of pet food you choose (kibble, baked/air dried, canned, cooked, raw) is your decision. However, remember that highly processed foods and ingredients are linked to health concerns. In the same way that human nutrition endorses limiting highly processed foods, the same is true for our pets.

