

## Choosing the Right Food for your Dog

Ask twenty people what the best thing to feed your dog is and you'll probably get twenty different answers. Like politics, it is a matter that is often best to leave out of polite conversation. Some people believe that dogs are dogs and eating the \$7 for 40 lb bag of dog food from the discount store is perfectly fine. Others argue that if you are not feeding your dog fresh killed, organic, free-range meat you're dooming the poor animal to a long and painful death. The truth, of course, is somewhere in between.



My approach to finding the best dog food for my dogs is to be as educated as possible and that means reading what is listed on the ingredients on the back of the bag, rather than paying attention to the marketing that went into the front of the bag. A good rule of thumb is to make sure that you can pronounce and picture in your mind each of the first ten ingredients. Ingredients are listed according to weight, so the higher up something is on the list, the more there is of it in the product. Whole, minimally processed foods should make up the bulk of the final product.

An animal protein source should be the first ingredient listed. You should be able to identify the animal that the meat came from, i.e. beef, lamb, pork, chicken, turkey, etc. as opposed to just calling it "meat". Why?

-There has been some evidence that road kill, dead zoo and circus animals, and possibly even euthanized dogs and cats wind up as "animal protein" or "meat meal".

-Even if the above proves to be untrue, each protein source has its own distinct nutritional identity. If a dog is allergic to beef and the meat meal usually only contains chicken and pork, but one time also includes beef products, then you will have a dog with an allergic reaction.

-It also means that the fat, protein, and nutritional content may vary from batch to batch, which can be frustrating if you are trying to control your dog's weight.



Biologically speaking, dogs are carnivores: they have sharp teeth for tearing and a relatively short digestive tract. This enables all canines to be able to take down prey, rip it up, and digest it quickly before any food poisoning type illness can take root in the intestines. A dog can live well on a diet of mostly or all grains and vegetables, but in most cases it is not optimal. Dog kibble needs grain in it to hold it together during the baking process. Some dog food manufacturers take this a step too far and use grains and plant proteins as the bulk of the food because they are less expensive than meat. Things to be aware of when seeing grains on the ingredient label:

- Corn is **not** a good grain for dogs. They are unable to effectively process the nutrients in corn and many dogs, particularly Labs, are

allergic to corn. These allergies can show themselves as increased itching, ear infections, hair loss, or hot spots, among other things.

- Wheat can cause the same problems for allergy-prone dogs as corn, although it is somewhat less common.
- Watch for ingredient lists that break up grain into several different parts. For example, one popular dog food lists; lamb, brewer's rice, ground corn, and corn gluten meal as the first four ingredients. It looks good, because lamb is number one. However, ground corn and corn gluten meal are the same grain, just prepared differently. If it was listed solely as corn, it would be number one or two on the list.

While there are some ingredients that are ok, even if they aren't optimal, there are some things to avoid at all costs.

-By products of any kind. A by-product is what is left over after the good stuff is taken out of a food. This can mean feathers and fur, which a dog might eat and enjoy, but not get any nutritional value from. Or, it can mean meat or grains that are diseased or died from unnatural causes, such as cancer or parasites.

-BHT/BHA and ethoxyquin are all inexpensive preservatives used in some dog foods. These three chemicals have been linked to cancer and other health issues, both in humans and in our pets. There is no good reason to use them and many high grade foods have found alternative ways to preserve food.

-Animal digest of any kind. I have yet to find a solid definition of what digest is. It is something that I can't picture in my mind, so I eliminate any foods that contain it.

The following is a list of food that meets the criteria mentioned in this article. It is not an all inclusive list, nor is every food on it the best food for every dog. You, as owner or primary caregiver, know the dogs in your care best. Be informed and choose the best food that you can afford that your dog thrives on and know that you're doing a good thing for your four-legged family members. The list is in no particular order:

- Canidae (<http://www.canidae.com>)
- Wellness (<http://www.oldmotherhubbard.com/>)
- Innova (<http://www.naturapet.com> )
- California Natural (<http://www.naturapet.com> )
- Solid Gold (<http://www.solidgoldhealth.com> )
- Flint River (<http://www.flintdogfood.com/> )
- Back To Basics (<http://www.backtobasicspetfood.com/> )
- Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover's Soul (<http://www.chickensoupforthepetloverssoul.com/> )
- Nutro Natural Choice (<http://www.nutroproducts.com/> )
- Natural Balance (<http://www.naturalbalanceinc.com/> )
- Nature's Variety (<http://www.naturesvariety.com/> )



These foods can be a bit more difficult to find since they are not available at the local grocery store. Independent pet stores and some health food stores may carry these foods or can order them for you. You can also talk to groomers or trainers to see if they would be willing to order in bulk and sell to you and other customers. The foods may also be found at <http://www.waggintails.com>, <http://www.petfooddirect.com>, or through the web sites included with the named foods above. If your dog's food isn't on the list, don't worry! Read the ingredient list on the bag and see what it says. If you're comfortable with the ingredients and your dog is doing well, continue feeding the food. If not, try one of the above mentioned foods, or do a search for a food that fits you and your dog better.

If you are interested in finding out more information on nutrition, there are several places you can look. The internet is full of information, both good and bad, so take what you read with a grain of salt. Here is a list of references that has helped me to gain the information written in this article:



- "The Whole Dog Journal" <http://www.whole-dog-journal.com>
- <http://www.api4animals.org/doc.asp?ID=689>
- <http://www.naturapet.com/display.php?d=tools-tab> (this is a website for Innova and California Natural foods, however it contains wonderful information for understanding what ingredient labels mean.)
- K9Nutrition list at <http://www.yahogroups.com>
- <http://www.bowchow.com/>

Please feel free to discuss any dietary changes with your veterinarian. However, keep in mind that vet schools focus on anatomy, biology, zoology and various other sciences and skills that aid in diagnosing and treating animals. Nutrition does not constitute a large part of the vet student's course-load: there simply isn't much room for it. Most of the nutrition seminars and text books are written by the same companies that sell their foods for the vets to display in their waiting rooms. This doesn't make the vets ignorant or those foods bad. It simply means that your veterinarian may not be up to date on new foods currently available on the market, nor the new studies and theories about ingredients in popular foods. You are your dog's guardian and it is up to you to be informed as to what is best for your pet. No one can make you make changes that you aren't comfortable with or that you feel might not be in the best interest of your pet.