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## HOW DO I CHOOSE THE BEST PET FOOD FOR MY DOG OR CAT?

FIRST, you should choose a pet food company (or more than one).

The World Small Animal Veterinary Association has published a document called “Selecting the Best Pet Food for your Pet” which you can read here: <https://wsava.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Selecting-the-Best-Food-for-your-Pet.pdf>

This was an attempt to give pet owners some good questions to ask pet food companies regarding their business practices and the quality of their foods as well as empower pet owners themselves to select better pet foods. These questions are a starting place, however, and the list has deficiencies. I encourage you to read the questions, but also realize it inherently selects for the largest companies. Many excellent pet foods are made by smaller companies with use of Veterinary Nutritionists or PhD Animal Nutritionists as independent consultants. A Veterinary Nutritionist is a veterinarian and clinician by training but they may not be skilled in pet food formulation or food science. Knowledge of pet food formulation and food science is an essential element in the creation and manufacturing of palatable, safe and healthy pet foods. These questions do not address this aspect of pet food development and production. Also not addressed in the WSAVA questions is how to assess pet food safety, digestibility, overall quality and the deficiencies of AAFCO recommendations in addressing these concerns. Despite what websites online say, ingredient lists are not a measuring stick of pet food quality as they can be deceiving, are manipulated to be more appealing to consumers and are in no way a total assessment of a pet food. So, the WSAVA questions are really only a starting place.

These are my suggestions:

1. Choose companies with a track record. Choose the companies with a history of producing consistently safe and quality foods, that employ of high quality employees or consultants (PhD Animal Nutritionists or Veterinary Nutritionists), and those that use profits to reinvest in the company (not just for expanding brands/products for greater profits). Companies that show commitment to research for the betterment of pet health including nutrition also get points in my book.
2. The company should continue to use or have access to a PhD Animal Nutritionist and/or a Board Certified Veterinary Nutritionist (employed or as a consultant). Both or even more than one is optimal. Will they share this information with you when you inquire? They may not share the name but confirm they do use this quality of consultation for their foods.
3. Choose a company whose philosophy fits with your personal standards and/or your dog’s needs. This can be very different for pet owners. Some pet owners want total transparency (access to nutrient profiles), sustainability, charity, organic, non-GMO, raw vs cooked, least processed, only sourced or made in the USA, etc. These are personal decisions you must make on your own that may or may not be relevant to product quality, consistency, etc. This is another layer of evaluation of a pet food.

So, you have a healthy pet, now what do I choose?

- You have picked a few companies you like. MOST IMPORTANTLY, choose products that are appropriate for your dog’s life stage (adult maintenance, puppy, all life stages). The product must carry the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) feeding claim to be complete and balanced for this life stage. This is not a product labeled for “supplemental or intermittent feeding.” Nutritional deficiencies can result if feeding a supplemental/intermittent food as a sole diet or too large a portion of the daily diet.

- Consider choosing a therapeutic diet (prescription diet) if you want a tight nutrient analysis and ingredients that will not change over time based on profit margins. It is common practice for over-the-counter diets to float in ingredients based on availability and cost. This is especially problematic for pets with medical conditions or “sensitive” pets. They are not required to notify you of these changes and labeling may lag behind (although this is technically illegal). I recommend therapeutic diets when I need consistency in ingredients and the formulation. Therapeutic diets are also the most well studied diets and often exceed in digestibility compared to other foods. They are tracked more closely in the pet patient population when actually fed. Veterinarians are most familiar with how these diets perform.
- Consider rotation between various companies and brands, flavors, etc.. Always observe a transition by adding new food in slowly over several days to a week of more or feed the foods in combination all the time. If your dog/cat tolerates this, this is an option.
- Avoid exotic ingredients like game meats (venison, rabbit, emu, pheasant, duck, etc.) They are not necessary in your pet’s diet and if a food allergy issue emerges, we need some “novel” ingredient options (not fed prior) in case an elimination diet is required. There is lots of variety still out there with more common, well understood foods – chicken, beef, lamb, turkey, egg, fish, vegetarian foods, etc.
- In general, less processed foods might offer advantages compared to highly processed options, however, choosing several options is acceptable and realistic. If you choose a raw diet, make sure the company has in place quality validated and trusted control measures for handling raw foods and to reduce risk of pathogens (educate yourself and ask questions). Recalls have occurred for pathogen contamination in both raw and cooked commercial foods, both fresh and dry kibble.
- If you wish to feed homemade (cooked or raw), **it is essential to make sure you have a balanced recipe formulated by a Veterinary Nutritionist** and stick with it (avoid diet drift in changing ingredients).
- Add a topper with other fresh foods – veggies, fruits, lean fresh cooked meats, etc. This topper (along with treats and additional snacks) should not comprise more than 10% of your dog’s daily calories to avoid unbalancing the total daily diet. Avoid grapes, raisins, onions, garlic, etc., which can be toxic to pets. Rotate colors of the rainbow with these foods to provide anti-oxidants, phytochemicals, etc., the things we do not measure in diets but are health promoting.
- Do not buy very large bags of foods. Food should be used within one month if possible as deterioration of food quality occurs with prolonged storage (loss of nutrients, increased spoilage, etc.).
- Choose higher moisture, lower carbohydrate foods for cats, if at all possible, or feed a combination as a compromise. Dry kibble diets may be needed for some cats, however, there are many health advantages for canned or wet foods. A long transition may be needed for stubborn cats that are very used to dry kibble and refuse to change to a higher moisture canned or homemade diet.
- Do not feed free choice – for most pets this will result in obesity over time.

#### **IN SUMMARY:**

- Consider a rotation of foods if well tolerated – choose 3-4 brands, companies, food forms.
- Feed an appropriate amount of calories to avoid an overweight body condition.
- 90% of the diet should be completed and balanced foods, while 10% can be treats, toppers, snacks.

This may seem like more effort, however, in the end, remember the best diet for your pet is the one they do best on. They should enjoy their food, eat well, maintain an appropriate weight, have a healthy haircoat, good stool quality on the average, and have no recurring gastrointestinal issues. Check in with your veterinarian frequently to be sure everything is on track.