

# Are Pet Supplements Worth the Time and Effort?

If you take supplements, you've likely wondered if your pet could also benefit from taking them. Most pets stand to benefit from supplements, two rules apply, however. Avoid giving your dog or cat supplements made for humans, as well as supplements that are added to commercial pet food.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Consumers are becoming increasingly interested in dietary supplements not only for themselves, but also for furry family members
- Supplement categories include those for joint health, GI tract support, heart, liver, and kidney support, and skin and coat health
- High quality dietary supplements can be extremely beneficial to your pet's health and longevity; work with a knowledgeable veterinarian to determine what types of supplements are best for your dog or cat

Pet parents are learning more every day about the potential benefits of nutritional and issue-targeted dietary supplements for their own health and that of family members, including the four-legged kind. As president and founding member of the **[National Animal Supplement Council](#)** (NASc), Bill Bookout observed a decade ago:

*"There aren't any magic bullets out there, but I think supplements are becoming more and more recognized and substantiated as a valuable component of a comprehensive care program where we either try to maintain general health and wellness, or manage health as a result of the aging process or some health challenge."<sup>1</sup>*

The most popular categories of pet supplements continue to be those for gastrointestinal (GI) tract health, liver and kidney health, heart health, joint health, and skin and coat health.

## Joint Health Supplements

Studies show that about 1 in 3 cats over the age of 8 can benefit from support for joint function and comfort. And for 1 in 5 dogs, especially large and giant breeds, support for optimal hip and joint help can be of tremendous benefit. In fact, we now know that dogs may need support long before they enter their senior years.

To enhance the comfort and function of your pet's joints, the first thing I always recommend is to feed a minimally processed, nutritionally balanced, species-specific diet. It's also critical to maintain your pet at a healthy body weight to take excess stress off her joints. No amount of supplementation can fix poor nutrition.

Appropriate exercise will help maintain your pet's healthy muscle mass and joint flexibility, along with providing healthy cartilage-supporting supplements to promote and protect hip and joint function. Supplements for joint health typically contain glycosaminoglycans (GAGs). GAGs promote the health of cartilage, which is the strong, elastic tissue lining the bone surfaces in joints.

Cartilage cells naturally produce glycosaminoglycans, which when combined with water provide cushioning to help protect your pet's skeletal structure during movement and exercise.

A very important component of an effective joint health supplement for pets is natural eggshell membrane, which is a source of elastin, collagens, and glycosaminoglycans, such as chondroitin sulfate and glucosamine that supports the stability and flexibility of your pet's joints.

Other excellent joint support agents include cetyl myristoleate (CMO for short), collagen type II, green-lipped mussel, and methylsulfonylmethane (MSM).

## Supplements for GI Tract Support

Two exceptionally beneficial supplements to promote healthy digestion in pets are probiotics and digestive enzymes. Probiotics are friendly strains of bacteria that promote healthy levels of good bacteria in your pet's GI tract and defend against pathogenic bacteria.

The digestive tract is the largest immune organ in your pet's body. Your dog or cat has even more intestinal bacteria than you do, despite her much smaller size. The GI tracts of companion animals are designed to handle a tremendous bacterial load — bacteria that could quickly develop into a life-threatening infection if found elsewhere in your pet's body.

A healthy population of friendly bacteria keeps your pet's immune system in good working order. If the balance of bad-to-good intestinal microbes gets out of whack, your pet will eventually develop GI symptoms and an increased susceptibility to illness.

Studies show that animals raised without friendly bacteria in the gut, or with a poor balance of good-to-bad gut bacteria, are at dramatically increased risk for disease.

When researching supplements for your pet, you'll want to avoid human probiotics, and probiotics added to commercial pet food. Probiotic formulas used by humans were developed specifically to fortify the bacterial species found in the human GI tract. Pets have specific strains of bacteria unique to them, so they need a unique probiotic.

The bacteria in a probiotic must be live and able to reproduce in order for it to be beneficial. Tests on dog foods claiming to contain probiotic microorganisms showed the manufacturing process kills too many of the live bacteria, rendering the probiotic effect useless by the time the food is packaged and shipped.

**Look for a pet probiotic** that can survive the acidic environment of your dog's or cat's stomach, contains enough live organisms to colonize the intestines, and the correct strains of bacteria beneficial for pets (not people). It should also remain stable under normal storage conditions and be easy to give to your pet.

High quality **digestive enzymes** for pets should be sourced from animals (not plants or fungi), and should ideally contain some or all of these ingredients: betaine HCl, ox bile extract, bromelain, papain, pancreatin, protease, amylase and lipase.

## Supplements to Support Healthy Heart Function

A very important supplement for pet heart health is CoQ10, or more specifically, ubiquinol, the reduced form of CoQ10. (As pets get older their bodies have less ability to convert CoQ10 to its active form, ubiquinol.) CoQ10 is a coenzyme that nearly every one of your pet's body functions depends on, every cell, every organ, and every tissue.

CoQ10 is a compound produced naturally in the liver. It does its work deep down in the mitochondria of cells. Cells use CoQ10 to support their energy and growth. And cells with the fastest turnover, including heart cells, mouth tissue cells, intestinal mucosal cells, and immune system cells, demand high levels of CoQ10.

Coenzyme Q10 also contributes to healthy circulation, promotes optimal immune function, supports the healthy presence of oxygen in tissues, and supports cardiovascular health.

Pets who can most benefit from ubiquinol supplementation include those who need additional cardiovascular support, all pets aged 7 and older that can benefit from mitochondrial support, and competitive athletes.

## Supplements for Liver and Kidney Support

There are a number of wonderful supplements to support your pet's organs of detoxification. Liver and kidney support agents include milk thistle, SAMe, L-glycine, phosphatidylcholine, curcumin, taurine (promotes healthy bile production needed for detoxification), N-acetyl L-cysteine, resveratrol (Japanese knotweed), schisandra extract, green tea leaf extract (decaffeinated), L-glutathione, chlorella, superoxide dismutase and dandelion leaf.

As always, I recommend you talk with your integrative or holistic veterinarian about your pet's individual needs. Since kidney disease is epidemic in cats today, to help your feline family member avoid kidney and urinary tract disease, be sure to feed a moisture-rich, species-specific diet to minimize stress on her vital organs.

Depending on a cat's individual situation, I sometimes use an amino acid blend called Renavast. Standard Process Feline Renal Support can also be beneficial, as well as phosphorous binders and sodium bicarbonate (which alkalizes the body), if appropriate. Your veterinarian can help you decide if these are indicated based on your pet's specific situation.

## Skin and Coat Supplements

Dietary supplements for your pet's skin and coat health typically contain essential fatty acids, often a blend of omega-3s, -6s and -9s. The problem with many of these blended supplements is that most dogs and cats today, especially those eating processed pet food, get an overabundance of omega-6s and not enough omega-3s, specifically DHA and EPA.

A combination of inexpensive grain and corn-based ingredients, vegetable oils (corn, soy, safflower, canola, most of them genetically modified), and fats from chicken and meat create pet food packed with omega-6 fats. In addition, the omega-3 fats used in most commercial pet foods come from plant or vegetable sources that aren't converted

efficiently to DHA and EPA, and the manufacturing process typically destroys what value these delicate fatty acids offer.

So the best essential fatty acid supplement for the vast majority of today's dogs and cats is an omega-3 supplement made from marine oils, including sustainably sourced **krill oil** or wild caught fish oil (salmon, sardine or anchovy). Squid oil is another option. Vegetable-derived oils such as coconut, chia, flax and olive oil do not contain EPA and DHA.

If you're thinking about dietary supplements for your dog or cat, again, I recommend you talk with your integrative or holistic veterinarian about what products would be most beneficial for your pet's individual needs. You might also want to listen to my interview with Bill Bookout for tips on how to choose high quality animal supplements for your pet:

## **Sources and References**

[dvm360 June 15, 2017](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Veterinary Practice News, September 27, 2012](#)

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