

Secrets to Picking the Best Supplements for Pets

Dietary supplements can help support your pet's physical health and well-being, but only if they're high-quality and effective.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Between 10% and 33% of dog and cat owners — and up to 84% of horse guardians — in the U.S. give their pets supplements or nutraceuticals
- Dietary supplements can help support your pet's physical health and well-being, but only if they're high-quality and safe
- Many pet supplements geared toward cats, dogs and horses have a lack of quality control, safety and efficacy data to support their use
- Well-controlled clinical trials are needed to determine safety and efficacy for many pet supplements
- I recommend partnering with your integrative or holistic veterinarian to determine which supplements will be most beneficial for your pet's individual needs

Dietary supplements can help support your pet's physical health and well-being, but only if they're high-quality and safe. As it stands, many of the supplements on the market geared toward cats, dogs and horses have a lack of quality control, safety and efficacy data to support their use.¹

Supplements intended for companion animals are not included in the Dietary Supplemental Health and Education Act of 1994, which means they're subject to less regulatory oversight than dietary supplements intended for humans.²

In the video above, you can view my interview with Bill Bookout, president and founding member of the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC), about tips on how to choose high-quality dietary supplements. But better oversight across the board could also help prompt changes industry-wide.

Many Pet Guardians Give Their Pets Supplements

Between 10% and 33% of dog and cat owners — and up to 84% of horse guardians — in the U.S. give their pets supplements or nutraceuticals.³ For dogs and cats, supplements for joint and digestive health are the most common, followed by those for cognition, skin and coat health and heart health.

Cat guardians are most likely to look for hairball control supplements and those for urinary tract infections and kidney disease. Joint and mobility supplements are also common among U.K. horse owners, while in the U.S. horse owners often used joint supplements to help treat osteoarthritis or prevent joint disease.

“Additional supplements commonly used in horses include digestive aids, including pro- and prebiotics and those designed to prevent or resolve gastric ulcers; biotin, methionine and zinc to promote hoof growth; **omega-3 fats** for coat; and thiamine, magnesium, L-tryptophan, valerian and chamomile for behavioral effects,” Dr. Carrie Finno with the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis, wrote in Nutrition Today.⁴

Supplements for Pets Are Rarely Rigorously Tested

Finno’s review highlights the limited oversight and regulation of **veterinary pet supplements** and nutraceuticals compared to human supplements, along with the lack of robust data to support their safety and efficacy.⁵ She points out that testing for quality, safety and efficacy is lacking not only for products currently on the market but also for the substances they’re made of.

“Veterinarians and animal owners should encourage increased enforcement of regulations of these products and demand that manufacturers work with researchers to fund and perform well-controlled clinical trials to determine safety and efficacy,” Finno writes.⁶ Those studies, she says, should include:⁷

- “Independent evaluation of product contents
- A well-defined blinded and randomized study design with placebo controls and an effective sample size
- Detail provided to allow for replication and no additional treatment provided
- Accurately reported statistical analyses
- Conflicts of interest and funding sources (including supplement manufacturer) declared”

Regulations for Animal Supplements in ‘Disarray’

The Center for Veterinary Medicine is a branch of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that’s in charge of regulating animal food products.⁸ CVM previously requested a report from the National Research Council on the safety of three animal dietary supplements — lutein, evening primrose oil, and garlic — for horses, dogs and cats.⁹

Due to inadequate data, the researchers who wrote the report said they could not define a safe upper limit for the supplements and added that “regulations dealing with animal dietary supplements are in disarray.” Among the problems standing in the way of assessing pet supplements’ safety are lack of standardization among active ingredients and limited safety studies. According to the report:¹⁰

“Many challenges stand in the way of determining whether or not animal dietary supplements are safe and at what dosage. Supplements considered safe in humans and other cross-species are not always safe in horses, dogs, and cats. An adverse event reporting system is badly needed ... Clear and precise regulations are needed to allow only safe dietary supplements on the market.”

Work With Your Integrative Vet to Find Safe Supplements

NASC has a Quality Seal designed to make it easier to spot high-quality supplements for companion animals and horses. In addition to maintaining an adverse event reporting system, companies with products that display the NASC Quality Seal must comply with stringent labeling requirements, have ingredients reviewed by the NASC Scientific Advisory Committee, have documented quality control and more.¹¹

However, there are also other human grade, third-party tested supplements available for a wide range of companion animal conditions. For instance, regarding **joint health** (one of the most common reasons why pet owners look for animal supplements), there are a variety of popular nutraceutical chondroprotective agents (CPAs) including glucosamine sulfate, collagen, MSM, eggshell membrane, perna mussel and hyaluronic acid. CPAs slow the rate of cartilage degeneration, which is critical for preserving healthspan and quality of life.

There are supplements for every organ system and medical condition, but also newer categories of supplements to support genetic predispositions, metabolic processes and pathways. Most importantly, remember you can't supplement your pet's way out of a poor lifestyle.

I recommend addressing all wellness obstacles in your pet's immediate living environment before buying any supplements. Addressing poor nutrition coming from ultraprocessed pet food, meeting daily exercise/rehabilitation needs, removing environmental chemical exposures, minimizing emotional and mental stress and maximizing social experiences and enrichment is step one. Supplements can then be added to support these ongoing efforts.

The form, dose and type of supplements your functional medicine or integrative veterinarian recommends should be based on a careful assessment of your pet's individual needs, and will change over time, as your pet's body changes. Trustworthy supplement brands will be happy to answer your questions about third-party testing, sourcing and quality control.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8} [Nutr Today. 2020 Mar-Apr; 55\(2\): 97–101](#)

⁹ [Science Daily August 22, 2008](#)

¹⁰ [The National Academies, Report in Brief, Safety of Dietary Supplements for Horses, Dogs, and Cats](#)

¹¹ [NASC, NASC Quality Seal](#)
