

# This Popular Pet Food Trend Could Put Your Pet's Life at Risk

These ingredients may sound appealing to you, but they can spell disaster for your pet. Inappropriate for dogs and cats, these trendy foods can jeopardize your pet's health, and even lead to blindness and cardiovascular disease in certain pets.

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

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Growing trends in the misnamed "natural" pet food market include diets with plant-based proteins, ancient grains and exotic proteins
- As more pet parents consider these types of pet diets, it's important to understand why many trends in the human food market should not cross over to the pet food market
- Plant-based proteins are biologically inappropriate nutrition for carnivorous pets because they don't provide all the essential amino acids your dog's or cat's body requires
- Ancient grains are still grains, and no healthier for your dog or cat than modern, manipulated grains such as wheat
- The overuse of exotic proteins in pet food will inevitably lead to the inability to develop novel protein diets for dogs and cats with serious food intolerances

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A recent issue of a pet food industry journal listed popular trends in what is called the "natural" pet food market. For those who might not be aware, the term "natural" has become a meaningless marketing buzzword in both the human and pet food industries. It appears all over processed food packages and labels, ignoring the fact that processed food cannot be natural food.

*Definition of natural: "Existing in or derived from nature; not made or caused by humankind."<sup>1</sup>*

Obviously, with rare exceptions, food that comes in a can, bag or box has been made or caused by humankind. Having said that, let's get back to the subject of growing trends in the falsely named natural pet food market. These are:<sup>2</sup>

- Human-grade
- Grass fed or free-range
- Limited ingredient diets
- Plant-based protein
- Ancient grains
- Exotic proteins

In a recent article, I discussed the first three: human-grade, grass fed or free-range and limited ingredient diets. Now let's take a closer look at the remaining three.

## Plant-Based Protein

I'm guessing trends in plant-based protein in dog and cat food are the result of the pet food industry's attempt to create an equivalency between plant-based and animal protein. It's possible there are also misguided pet owners in the mix who are determined to force a vegetarian or vegan diet on a meat-eating animal.

Plant-based protein is biologically inappropriate for dogs and cats, who need 22 amino acids to be healthy. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein. Dogs' bodies can synthesize (make) 12 of those 22; cats can synthesize 11. The remaining amino acids must come from the food they eat, which is why they're called essential amino acids.

The protein in animal tissue has a complete amino acid profile. Plant proteins do not contain all the amino acids critical for the health of carnivores, and unlike humans who have the physiological ability to turn plant proteins into the missing pieces needed for a complete amino acid profile, dogs and cats don't.

They must obtain preformed amino acids directly from their diet. For example, one of the amino acids missing in plants is taurine, which is found in animal muscle meat, especially the heart and liver. **Taurine deficiency** causes serious health problems in cats, including cardiovascular disease and blindness. Some cat parents believe they can feed a vegetarian or vegan diet, and add a taurine supplement.

In my opinion, this is the equivalent of eating nothing but iceberg lettuce or rice and taking a synthetic multivitamin. That vitamin can't possibly make up for all the nutrients missing from a lettuce or rice-only diet. In addition, your pet's protein sources should provide a wide spectrum of amino acids.

The protein sources with wide-spectrum amino acid profiles include beef, bison, chicken, eggs, fish, lamb, turkey, duck, venison, elk and goat. Protein is a crucial component of every cell in your pet's body. Essential amino acids from high-quality animal protein build healthy cells, organs, muscles, enzymes and hormones.

## Ancient Grains

This is another example of a human food trend crossing over to pet food for no good reason, since dogs and cats have no biological requirement for grains, even ancient ones. There's no official definition of "ancient grains." They're generally defined as grains and pseudocereals that have remained essentially unchanged by selective breeding over the last several hundred years. By contrast, modern wheat, which is constantly bred and changed, is not an ancient grain, nor is corn or rice.

Ancient grains, which include teff, amaranth, quinoa, millet, sorghum, spelt, farro, kamut, freekeh, einkorn and others,<sup>3</sup> are typically marketed in the human food industry as healthier than modern grains.

As for your pet's diet, I recommend eliminating all grains. The only grain wild canines and felines get in their natural diet comes predigested in the stomach contents of prey animals. Most grain-based pet foods contain loads of it because grain is plentiful and cheap. Grain-based pet foods are pro-inflammatory and generally detrimental to the health of dogs and cats because as carnivores, they aren't designed to process food containing grain.

## Exotic Proteins

I'm guessing this particular trend in pet food is due primarily to the increase in digestive and food sensitivity issues in dogs and cats, along with pet food manufacturers' efforts to innovate to stay competitive in the marketplace. Exotic proteins are animal proteins not commonly eaten in a specific region of the world. For example, kangaroo is an exotic protein in the U.S.; beef is not.

The terms "exotic protein" and "novel protein" are often used interchangeably, however, there is a distinction between them. Exotic proteins are unusual or uncommon in a given area, while novel proteins can be common to the area, but not commonly eaten by the pet.

For example, to a dog who has never eaten anything but chicken, beef is a novel protein. Traditional veterinary and pet food industry recommendations over the last several decades have called for dogs and cats to be fed the same commercially available processed pet food twice a day, every day, year in and year out.

I believe this advice has created generations of dogs and cats with gut issues, food sensitivities and a host of chronic diseases resulting from daily ingestion of poor-quality diets containing the same protein sources, typically chicken, fish, beef or lamb. In response, pet food manufacturers have begun developing formulas containing exotic and novel proteins such as venison, kangaroo and rabbit.

And now that exotic proteins are trending with consumers, pet food makers are taking it up a notch by including multiple types of novel and exotic proteins in a single formula. This has created a situation in which it will soon be difficult or impossible to find a novel protein to offer pets who need an elimination diet to resolve a serious food intolerance problem.

For example, the novel protein of choice used to be lamb, but the inclusion of lamb in so many commercial pet foods today has rendered it useless as a remedy for pets with allergies. What pet food companies are doing by including exotic proteins in mass-produced pet food formulas is a recipe for disaster.

If pet parents were advised to feed their animal companions a variety of common proteins like chicken, beef and lamb from high-quality sources on a rotating basis, it's unlikely we'd be seeing the epidemic of food sensitivities that exist today. If your dog or cat has food sensitivities and you're considering an elimination diet, take a look at my in-depth video and article on how to heal your pet's food intolerance with a novel protein diet.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [English Oxford Living Dictionaries](#)

<sup>2</sup> [PetfoodIndustry.com, March 17, 2017](#)

<sup>3</sup> [U.S. News, January 20, 2015](#)

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