

The New Functional Food That's Anything but Healthy or Functional

Truth be told, it's a junk food, not a health food. So watch out for the cleverly disguised marketing spin likely to help sell this as a healthy treat. Don't be conned. This 'functional food' has no place in a healthy pet's food, and could confound their health and make you very sorry.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The processed pet food industry is always on the lookout for new and creative ways to market ingredients in their products as "healthy"
- One recent example is molasses, which the industry refers to as a "functional pet food ingredient," presumably because it's made from plants that contain substances supposedly beneficial to animals
- Bottom line: Molasses is sugar, and added sugar has no place in a healthy pet's diet
- The best way to avoid biologically inappropriate, over-processed ingredients and pet food marketing spin is to feed your animal companion a balanced, species-appropriate and fresh food diet and homemade treats

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published January 16, 2017.

Recently I ran across an article in a pet food industry journal with the headline, "Molasses: Sweetener or functional carbohydrate?" and the subheading, "Is there a larger place in pet food for this functional pet food ingredient?" "Uh oh," I thought to myself, "here we go again ..."

You've probably heard the term functional food, but many people are unsure exactly what it means. According to the International Food Information Council Foundation (IFIC), functional foods:

"... [Are] thought to provide benefits beyond basic nutrition [vitamins and minerals] and may play a role in reducing or minimizing the risk of certain diseases and other health conditions."¹

Needless to say, the article headline caught my eye because I was curious as to what sort of health benefits sugar could possibly provide pets.

Some dog foods and treats on the market already include molasses, and according to Greg Aldrich, Ph.D., writing for PetfoodIndustry.com, "It smells great and dogs like the taste."²

The 411 on Molasses

Molasses, also known as black treacle in the U.K., is a gooey byproduct of the process that turns sugarcane and sugar beets into sugar. It's used primarily to sweeten and flavor foods intended for human consumption.

When sugarcane is harvested, it's stripped of its leaves and the juice is extracted by cutting, crushing or mashing the plants. The juice is then boiled to crystallize the sugar in a process called first syrup. First syrup product is sometimes called cane syrup and has the highest sugar content.

If the syrup is boiled a second time, it creates a product called second molasses, which has a slightly bitter taste.

The product of a third boiling is dark, thick blackstrap molasses, which has a robust, bitter flavor. Most of the sucrose from the original juice has crystallized and been removed, and the remaining sugar content is small.

Blackstrap molasses has a wide range of uses, including as a dietary supplement because it contains vitamin B6, calcium, magnesium, iron, manganese and potassium. It's also used in baking, in the production of ethanol, as fertilizer and as an ingredient in cattle feed.

Molasses made from sugar beets is a different type of molasses and the one being marketed to the pet food industry. Only the syrup that remains after the final crystallization stage is called molasses.

Beet molasses is 50% sugar, predominantly sucrose, but contains significant amounts of glucose and fructose. Beet molasses isn't considered a human-grade food, so it's used in animal feed.

If a molasses is marked "unsulphured" (British spelling), it just means it's no longer being preserved with sulfur dioxide, which was once added to many foods to control molds and bacteria.

In molasses, it was also used as a bleaching agent to lighten the color. Most brands no longer contain sulfur dioxide because it can give an off-flavor to the food and is toxic in high doses.

Molasses in Dog Food and Treats

There are apparently no regulatory restrictions on the use of molasses in pet food. According to Aldrich, it's used in dog foods and especially in baked biscuits and treats as a sweetener, binder and dust suppressant, as well as a source of energy.

*"Molasses works especially well in baked treats," says Aldrich, "as this takes advantage of reducing sugar interactions with amino acids in high-temperature, dry-heat baking ovens to form color and flavor."*³

It can also be used as a humectant (moisture preserver) in semi-moist and soft-moist pet foods, and as a component in jerky cures and flavorings. Aldrich mentions, "Some would argue that dogs do not need sucrose in their diets and may decry the addition to pet food."⁴

His response is that since polyol (sugar alcohol) humectants are already in wide use in pet foods today, molasses might be preferable as a "natural source" that is appealing to both dogs and their owners.

Aldrich adds, “Plus, it contains some additional plant components that are known to benefit the animal.”⁵

He’s referring to raffinose, which “behaves like a prebiotic,” betaine and other phytonutrients. It’s these substances, he says, that give rise to “some homeopathic medicinal claims regarding the virtues of molasses in disease prevention and cures.”

How a Junk Food Dog Biscuit Gets Sold as a Healthy Treat

I guess it’s the sugar cane or sugar beet plant components that make molasses a “functional carbohydrate,” according to Aldrich. I’m trying to imagine the marketing buzzwords that might be used to promote a new dog biscuit with added molasses. I think these are a given:

- Naturally sweetened
- Contains prebiotics to promote the growth of friendly bacteria in the digestive tract
- Contains phytonutrients to help prevent disease

See how easy it is to apply marketing spin to turn a grain-based, sugary dog biscuit into a “functional” treat? How many dog parents do you think would buy these biscuits thinking they were offering their pet a healthy snack? I’m guessing plenty.

Sugar by Any Other Name (Molasses) Is Still Sugar

Added sugar has no place in a healthy dog’s (or cat’s diet). Sugary pet food and treats can lead to obesity and all the health problems that go along with it, including diabetes and cancer. Sugar also feeds yeast and other opportunistic pathogens in the small intestine.

A high-quality pet treat won’t contain grains or unnecessary fillers, rendered animal byproducts, added sugar (masquerading as molasses or honey), chemicals, artificial preservatives or ingredients known to be allergenic.

These criteria rule out the vast majority of commercial pet treats on the market. However, most top-notch human-grade pet food producers (typically small operators) also make a few types of treats. I also recommend avoiding all grain-based treats. Your dog or cat has no biological requirement for the carbs in these treats, and in addition, they’re pro-inflammatory.

Instead of store-bought treats, consider offering living human foods instead. Cubed meats and cheeses make excellent training treats, as well as frozen peas and raw almonds, cashews, pecans, raw pumpkin seeds and Brazil nuts (but never macadamia nuts).

Healthy Pet Treats From Your Own Kitchen

If your dog likes dehydrated chicken strips (chicken jerky), you can make your own quite easily. Just buy some boneless chicken breasts, clean them and slice into long, thin strips — the thinner the better.

Place the strips on a greased or nonstick cookie sheet and bake them for at least three hours at 180 degrees F. The low temp dries the chicken out slowly, and the strips wind up nice and chewy. Let the strips cool, and then store them in plastic bags or another airtight container. You can also freeze them.

If you buy commercial canned pet food, you can “repurpose” a can for use as a supply of healthy treats. Open a can of your pet's favorite brand and spoon out little treat sized amounts onto a baking sheet covered with parchment paper. Put the baking sheet into the freezer until the bite-sized bits of food are frozen.

Then move them to an airtight container and put them back into the freezer until you're ready to offer them as snacks.

Sources and References

¹ [Food Insight](#)

^{2,3,4,5} [PetfoodIndustry.com, June 14, 2016](#)
