

## Is Your Cat's Food Up to Par?

Delve into the complexities of cat food quality. Learn about manufacturing practices, ingredient sources and the critical nuances that those labels may not reveal, ensuring you make the best choice for your pet's optimal health.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Mainstream conventional advice on how to choose a good quality cat food barely scrapes the surface of what's really important when it comes to nourishing your cat
- Where the food is manufactured, for example, and whether it was formulated by a nutritionist are important, however, more important is whether the ingredients are high quality and biologically appropriate
- The best diet you can offer your cat doesn't come in a can or a bag from the pet food store, but instead is a nutritionally balanced fresh food diet prepared in your own kitchen, with ingredients you hand-pick

When it comes to judging the quality of commercial cat food, the conventional veterinary community tends to focus on five general areas of concern:

1. Where the food is manufactured
2. Who manufactures it
3. Whether it contains additives, preservatives, or artificial flavors
4. Whether it has undergone **feeding trials**
5. Whether it contains an AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) nutritional statement

This is an acceptable place to start, but it's only a start and far from the complete picture. Whether your cat's diet is healthy (or worth your hard-earned money) depends on a multitude of additional factors.

### Where Your Cat's Food Is Manufactured Is Important, But ...

The general consensus of mainstream pet food experts is that formulas produced at a pet food company's own manufacturing facility are of better quality and safer than formulas produced at an offsite location, or by a third party.

An onsite production plant allows pet food companies to provide better quality control of ingredient sources and processes, which is why consumers are advised to look for the words "manufactured by" the pet food company on the label, rather than "manufactured for" or "distributed by."

However, there are several small, ethical pet food companies that produce outstanding products because they put their capital investments into excellent raw materials and not manufacturing equipment. My advice, if you're feeding a diet you simply love that has been co-packed or manufactured by someone else, is to get the back story on why the

food is being made elsewhere. Usually the website or a phone call to the company can explain who is making their products and why.

It's important to note that the biologically inappropriate ingredients that go into most commercial cat foods are not affected by where the food is manufactured. "Quality control" in this instance refers to measures taken to prevent contamination, mislabeling, and other production issues. It has nothing to do with the quality of the food in terms of its species-appropriateness.

So while it may be desirable to see "manufactured by" on a pet food label, the statement doesn't address whether or not the formula is highly nutritious for cats. The most profitable pet food manufacturers own all their own manufacturing equipment, but the quality of the raw materials they use typically leaves much to be desired.

## **Who Formulates Your Cat's Food Is Important, But ...**

Most major pet food producers employ animal nutritionists whose job it is to oversee and balance the ingredients that go into their formulas — a fact that is frequently touted by those who have an interest in promoting the biggest players in the industry.

However, what most pet guardians don't know is that the many veterinary nutritionists have financial ties to major pet food manufacturers.

Veterinary nutritionists are licensed vets who go on to become board certified by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN). Once certified, they very often go to work for pet food companies. Major pet food manufacturers also frequently pay the tuition for DVMs studying to become veterinary nutritionists.

So when you hear or read that the XYZ pet food company has veterinary nutritionists on staff, keep in mind that many practicing veterinary nutritionists are obligated in some way to a pet food manufacturer.

Many small, family-owned, good quality pet food manufacturers can't afford to have a full-time veterinary nutritionist on staff, so they employ them on a consulting basis. If you're buying your pet's food from a small, high-quality supplier, it should be easy enough to find out who their consultant is and his or her veterinary nutrition credentials.

## **Your Cat's Food Shouldn't Contain Chemicals, But ...**

Artificial flavors, additives and preservatives are often the source of "empty" or non-nutritious calories. In addition, some preservatives are known to be carcinogenic (cancer-causing) in humans such as butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) and butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT).

However, not only are additives, preservatives, and artificial flavors non-nutritious (and potentially toxic) — so are many of the basic ingredients in most processed cat food formulas.

Cats are obligate carnivores (meat eaters). Your kitty's body doesn't produce the enzymes necessary to digest grains, carbs or starches, yet those are the main ingredients in most big name commercial cat foods.

A biologically correct diet for a carnivore is high in moisture, high in protein, moderate in fat, and low in carbohydrates. The vast majority of pet foods on the market today are the opposite, e.g., low in moisture content, with low to moderate amounts of poor quality protein and fat, and high in starches or carbs.

So while it's certainly important to avoid cat food containing artificial flavors and colors, synthetic vitamins, and other additives and preservatives, it's equally important to feed a balanced, species-specific diet.

## **Cat Food Feeding Trials Are Important, But ...**

Many mainstream pet food experts consider AAFCO feeding trials to be the gold standard in ensuring that a new pet food formula provides proper nutrition. Consumers are advised to look for a statement on their cat food label that reads, "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that [Name of Pet Food Company] provides complete and balanced nutrition."

While I'm grateful that I live in a country that has an organization that offers some rough nutritional parameters to sustain life (the AAFCO standards — many countries have zero guidelines on the basic nutrients pets need to survive), using the agency's feeding trials as a stamp of approval for the quality of a particular type of pet food is shortsighted.

The protocol for these tests is a 6-month feeding trial involving as few as 8 test subjects, and the goal is only to determine whether a formula can sustain life in test participants. Only 6 of the 8 animals need to finish the trial, and if weight and certain of the most basic blood tests are normal, the food is deemed complete and balanced.

This is far from a "gold standard," in my opinion. Six pets still alive at the end of 6 months is insufficient proof that a pet food formula is biologically appropriate for a lifetime.

These trials are not a good measure of a food's ability to cause nutritional deficiencies or overdoses over a longer period, nor can they demonstrate the food's impact on longevity, reproduction or multi-generational health.

Fortunately, cats (and dogs) are among the most resilient animals on the planet. They're able to survive when fed foods they were never designed to eat.

However, degeneration does occur as a result of inappropriate nutrition, but because the changes are gradual and often hidden until a disease is full-blown, we've been able to deceive ourselves into believing that ultraprocessed pet foods are actually good for our animal companions.

But in my opinion, we've created dozens of generations of nutritionally compromised animals who suffer from degenerative diseases linked to nutritional deficiencies.

## **AAFCO Nutritional Statements Are Important, But ...**

AAFCO requires pet food manufacturers to include validation of the nutritional adequacy of their formulas before they can print a nutritional adequacy statement on the label. This means the food meets AAFCO's definition of complete and balanced nutrition in one or more life stages.

To provide validation of nutritional adequacy, pet food manufacturers can either prove by formulation that a product contains required levels of all essential nutrients deemed necessary by AAFCO, or they can use AAFCO-approved feeding trials.

Both of these options have significant drawbacks. As most readers here know, I believe the ancestral diet should be the gold standard we strive to meet for nutritional requirements.

Problems can arise when pet food manufacturers choose not to formulate products using AAFCO's minimum nutrient standards, or when humans try to guess at what constitutes an ancestral diet, or even take a stab at trying to meet the bare minimums set forth by AAFCO (whose nutrient requirements are far less than the ancestral diet) when preparing a homemade diet.

Veterinarians are the ones who see nutritional imbalances that create chronic disease, something I see consistently in pets fed the majority of processed diets formulated by AAFCO standards and poorly designed homemade diets.

In my view, AAFCO provides the most rudimentary nutritional guidelines as a basic foundation upon which to build. These guidelines are deficient, but if they are totally disregarded, it's very easy to cause entirely avoidable, grossly obvious nutritional health issues in pets, such as secondary nutritional hyperparathyroidism (metabolic bone disease), among others.

Because following the ancestral diet nutritional parameters provides almost double the nutrients of current AAFCO recommendations (in many instances), and as much nutrition from whole foods (vs. supplements) as economically possible, aiming to feed your pets an ancestrally balanced diet is the goal.

That said, in a perfect world I would love to see AAFCO switch to optimal nutrient requirements as outlined by the ancestral diet database rather than archaic "minimums" and occasional "maximums," determined by researchers and manufacturers in the last 50 years.

Additionally, I'd like AAFCO to factor nutrient loss from soil depletion, CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) full of animals raised in stressful, artificial and often inhumane environments, and the glyphosate load in food and its impact on digestibility and absorbability into their recommendations as well.

## **The Cat Food I Recommend**

A nutritionally optimal, balanced, raw homemade diet is the best food you can provide to your cat. However, it's very important not to wing it when preparing pet meals at home.

I say this because when pet food nutrition expert Steve Brown and I analyzed many of the homemade and prey model diets available, we learned they fall far short in trace minerals, antioxidants including nutrients like manganese, magnesium, vitamin E and D, copper, zinc, iron, choline, and essential fatty acids.

Additionally, if the diet doesn't have a proper fat or calcium to phosphorus balance, it can cause a myriad of health problems, especially in growing animals.

So, it's critically important that you know your homemade diet is balanced, preferably to the ancestral guidelines. Sadly, we find most homemade diets don't meet the dismal AAFCO guidelines, much less the ancestral diet parameters.

The great thing about a well designed, homemade raw diet is you get to handpick the ingredients. Making your own cat food can provide peace of mind because it's becoming increasingly difficult to find ethical pet food companies that use locally sourced or even U.S.-grown ingredients.

With homemade food (fed gently cooked, warmed or raw), you're in complete control of every ingredient that enters your pet's body. Fresh, unadulterated food contains all the enzymes and phytonutrients that are typically destroyed during the intense food processing necessary to create food products that are shelf-stable for months to years.

Making small, fresh batches of real food for your pets is the best way to ensure you're delivering the maximum level of species-specific nutrition to the animals in your care.

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