

## Even the Most Careful Pet Parent Can Easily Make This Trendy Mistake

It all sounds so good on paper. But the reality can be far different. The last thing you want to do is to feed pathogenic bacteria in your pet's GI tract. But follow this seemingly great trend, and you might do exactly that — much to your distress. Could this happen to your pet?

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A growing number of pet parents today are looking for specialty ingredients like prebiotics and probiotics in the pet food they buy
- It's important to know that for some pets with gastrointestinal disorders, prebiotics can exacerbate the problem and are not recommended
- It's also important to know that while probiotics are beneficial for almost every dog and cat, most probiotics added to commercial pet diets are killed off during the manufacturing process
- The best way to nourish your pet is with a fresh, whole food, balanced and species-appropriate diet and appropriate supplementation based on your dog's or cat's individual nutritional needs

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According to a November/December 2015 national pet owner survey conducted by Packaged Facts, an increasing number of dog and cat guardians are looking for specialty ingredients in the pet food they buy.<sup>1</sup> For example, they're looking for claims that a particular pet food contains prebiotics and probiotics.

Among U.S. survey respondents, 7% of dog owners and 6% of cat owners said they look for this nutrition claim on their pet food packaging.

Putting aside for now the fact that most specialty ingredients added to highly **processed pet food** are a waste of money, let's take a closer look at prebiotics and probiotics specifically.

### Prebiotics Defined

Prebiotics are non-digestible food ingredients that feed the growth of intestinal bacteria. They are complex sugars and include fructooligosaccharides (FOS), inulin and oligofructose.

FOS is produced from the natural fermentation of sugar cane. Inulin is found naturally in chicory root, garlic and onions (note: do not feed onions to pets!). Oligofructose is a breakdown product of inulin.

When bacteria ferment prebiotics within the large intestine, short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) are produced. SCFAs provide a number of benefits to your pet's GI tract. They provide the cells with energy, keep things moving through the intestines and reduce both inflammation and overgrowth of unfriendly bacteria.

## **Prebiotics Are a Bad Idea for Certain Pets**

So that's the good news about prebiotics, however, they aren't right for every animal. Marketing claims position prebiotics as feeding only friendly bacteria in the digestive tract, but studies show this isn't the case — prebiotics nourish unhealthy bacteria as well.

For a dog or cat with a very fit digestive tract, prebiotics probably won't do any harm. But many pets today have gastrointestinal (GI) conditions like inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), leaky gut (dysbiosis), small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO) and other issues.

This means the good-to-bad bacteria ratio in their GI tract is out of balance, and the last thing we want to do is feed pathogenic bacteria with prebiotics. Pets with yeasty guts have a significant worsening of their condition when fed prebiotics. Prebiotics are complex sugars, and sugar feeds yeast.

The most common type of prebiotic added to popular pet food formulas is beet pulp, a fibrous material found in sugar beets. Dried beet pulp is not an ideal source of prebiotics, just as the majority of affordable processed pet food is not an ideal source of nutrition for your dog or cat.

Higher-quality commercial pet foods containing prebiotics will typically list them as fructooligosaccharide, chicory root and/or garlic. Those are the ingredients to look for if your pet has a very healthy gut with none of the usual GI conditions seen in so many dogs and kitties today.

However, if you feed a balanced, commercial raw diet or prepare balanced homemade meals for your otherwise healthy pet, you don't need to add prebiotics unless your holistic veterinarian specifically recommends them for some reason.

## **The Role of Probiotics in Your Pet's Body**

Probiotics are friendly strains of bacteria that maintain healthy levels of good bacteria in your pet's GI tract, and also defend against opportunistic, potentially pathogenic bacteria. The digestive tract is the largest immune organ in your pet's body, and yours.

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 would quite likely trigger a life-threatening infection if found elsewhere in your dog's or cat'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 bugs gets out of whack, your dog or cat will eventually develop GI symptoms and an increased susceptibility to illness.

When your pet's gastrointestinal bacteria are in balance with the right amount and type of healthy bugs on board, there is symbiosis. Good things happen inside your pet's body. For example:

- Vitamins are made
- Vegetable fiber is processed efficiently
- Unfriendly bacteria are kept in check
- Toxins are well-managed

When unfriendly, pathogenic bacteria take over your pet's digestive system, it creates dysbiosis, which is more or less the opposite of symbiosis.

Dysbiosis results in increased permeability — leakiness — of the intestinal wall, which means your pet's GI tract will be less able to allow healthy bacteria and nutrients in and keep disease-causing bacteria out.

A healthy GI tract is selective about what is absorbed. Nutrients are taken in and non-nutritive substances, including toxins, are filtered out.

## **Why Processed Pet Food Containing Probiotics Is a Waste of Money**

When it comes to processed pet diets, a distinction between pre- and probiotics is that prebiotics are commonly added to pet food, but probiotics can't be (or shouldn't be). If you happen to run across a pet food claiming to contain probiotics, just leave it on the shelf.

Probiotics are sensitive to moisture and heat, so if they're added to a pet food formula — especially kibble — they'll be long dead and virtually useless by the time they make it into your dog's or cat's digestive tract. The bacteria in a probiotic must be live and able to reproduce in order for it to be beneficial.

High-quality pet probiotic supplements have some important things in common, including:

- The correct strains of bacteria beneficial for pets, not people
- Easy to give to your dog or cat
- The ability to survive the acidic environment of your pet's stomach
- Enough live organisms to colonize the intestines
- Product stability under normal storage conditions

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.

## **Top Recommendations**

It's much, much healthier for your pet if you feed fresh whole food as part of a balanced, species-appropriate diet rather than a commercial pet food formula with a laundry list of special ingredients like added prebiotics. As Dr. Joseph Wakshlag, associate professor of clinical nutrition at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine in New York points out in an interview with Veterinary Practice News:

*"... [S]ome manufacturers throw everything but the kitchen sink in their products and pet owners may think that makes it a good food when it doesn't. Manufacturers sometimes have ingredients in their foods that naturally contain prebiotics, but they add more like fructooligosaccharides and mannanoligosaccharides because owners are looking for that on the ingredients list."<sup>2</sup>*

Your dog or cat should receive the majority of his nutrients from a good-quality diet. With the basics in place, consult your **holistic veterinarian** about beneficial supplements, including additional probiotics, for the individual needs of your furry companion.

## **Sources and References**

[PetfoodIndustry.com](#) October 2, 2016

<sup>1</sup> [Packaged Facts Pet Food Market Reports](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Veterinary Practice News, September 27, 2012](#)

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