

Myths and Misperceptions About Ingredients Used in Commercial Pet Foods

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KEYWORDS

• By-products • Corn • Soy • Wheat • Grains • Carbohydrates • Preservatives

KEY POINTS

- Ingredients used in pet food can be cause for concern among pet owners and veterinarians, in part, due to lack of knowledge about these ingredients.
- Ingredients used in pet food are selected primarily for their nutrient content, as well as their impact on palatability, digestibility, and consumer preferences.
- The finished product quality depends on selection of ingredients that provide the desired features, as well as the appropriateness of the processing and cooking processes.
- If veterinarians have questions about the quality of a food, they should contact the manufacturer and inquire about the nutrient profile and the digestibility of the product, which are good markers of the quality of the food.
- Veterinarians also should consider the history of the company, their pattern of investment into research, and their safety record when considering whether or not to recommend a product.

Ingredients used in pet food can be cause for concern among both pet owners and veterinarians, in part, due to lack of knowledge about these ingredients. Pet owners may not understand why “chemicals” are included in the food, when, in fact, those chemicals are actually essential vitamins or minerals. They may not be aware that “meat by-products” include most of the organs and other highly nutritious parts of the animal. Some of the concern is triggered by information and misinformation widely available through various sources including the Internet, popular publications, other pet owners, and even veterinarians. This article provides the facts regarding several commonly expressed concerns or myths regarding ingredients used in commercial pet foods beginning with definitions of some frequently misunderstood terms (**Box 1**).

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Box 1**Explanation of commonly used ingredient terms**

AAFCO: The Association of American Feed Control Officials (<http://www.aafco.org>) is a voluntary membership association of local, state, and federal agencies charged by law to regulate the sale and distribution of animal feeds and animal drug remedies. Among their functions, they establish guidelines for pet foods in terms of nutritional guidelines and testing required to substantiate nutritional claims, and they define acceptable ingredients for use in animal feeds. Enforcement of these guidelines is done on a state by state level.

Animal or poultry digest: a highly palatable protein source that is made by chemical or enzymatic hydrolysis (digestion) of meat or poultry meat or by-products.

Beef tallow: fat derived from cattle.

BHA: butylated hydroxyanisole, an antioxidant used to protect dietary fats from becoming rancid.

Brewer rice: broken or small grains of white rice, they have the same nutritional value as intact white rice.

Corn gluten meal: a concentrated protein source derived from corn after removal of most of the starch, fiber, and oils. Although highly digestible, it requires a complementary source of lysine for optimum protein quality.

Flour: ingredient made from finely ground grains, which may or may not include the whole grain.

"Human grade": this term has no legal definition but implies that a food is suitable for human consumption. When one or more human edible ingredients are mixed with one or more nonhuman edible ingredients, the edible ingredients become nonhuman edible. According to AAFCO (<http://petfood.aafco.org/LabelingLabelingRequirements.aspx>), "human grade" claims should only be made if all ingredients, processing, and handling are such that the finished product is suitable for consumption by humans. If the finished product is not suitable for human consumption, then any claims related to "human grade" are considered misleading.

Meat by-products: a protein source consisting of organ meats, scrap meat, bone, blood, and fatty tissue from mammals, such as cattle or hogs. By-products do not include hair/hide, horns, hoofs or teeth, or intestinal contents.

Meat by-product meal: a concentrated protein source made by rendering^a and drying meat by-products.

Menadione sodium bisulfite complex: provides a stable dietary source of Vitamin K.

Mixed tocopherols: natural source of Vitamin E and related compounds, used as an antioxidant to protect dietary fats from becoming rancid.

Natural: as defined by AAFCO, any feed or ingredient derived solely from plant, animal, or mineral sources can be labeled as natural. Any item synthesized chemically cannot be considered natural.

Organic: a food or ingredient that has been produced and handled in compliance with the requirements of the USDA National Organic Program. For example, organic grains are grown without the use of synthetic fertilizers and do not use genetic engineering. For more information, the reader is referred to the USDA website: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/nop>

Poultry by-products: a protein source consisting of the cleaned parts of slaughtered poultry to include the organs, heads, and feet. Poultry predominantly includes chickens and turkeys, but may include other birds raised for food.

Poultry by-product meal: a concentrated protein source made by rendering^a and drying poultry by-products.

Soybean meal: a protein source derived from soybeans after removal of most of the starch, fiber, and oils. Although highly digestible, it requires a complementary source of methionine for optimum protein quality.

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