

## **Assessing Your Pets Diet**

Lesley New – BSc Nutrition and Food Science  
Mountain Dog Food

As advancements in science are made and more of our attention turns towards the impact of nutrition it stands to reason that these same considerations would be passed on to our pets. Yet with all the information available how do we make sense of our own diet, let alone that of our animals? The answer is to keep things simple, bring the concepts back to their basics and examine what you are feeding based on these principles.

Dogs by nature are carnivores and as such need a good quality meat source in their diet, namely from animal based protein. By virtue of their physiology and digestive capabilities dogs are not designed to eat a diet based on grain products. The more often fresh foods are included the better, this will avoid basing the diet on foods that are overly processed. Much like our own diets variety is the key to meeting nutritional requirements.

So how well does your dog's current food fit into these concepts? If you're feeding a more conventional diet (either canned or dry dog food) a good place to start is the ingredient label. Since the ingredients are listed by weight, at a minimum the first 2 items listed should be animal sources of protein (I.e. chicken, lamb, turkey, etc). This not only assures that the food is primarily based on protein, but by virtue of total product weight leaves a smaller percentage to be made up from grains.

When looking at the source of this protein it is best to avoid foods that use sources labeled meat "meal". These proteins have been rendered (read: cooked at very high temperatures for extended periods) and are often of questionable nutritional quality. It is also important to scan the label for the use of chemical preservatives, such as butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA), butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) and ethoxyquin. Although these chemicals have been approved for use in pet food some believe they are linked to the development of cancer.

You can instead opt for a food that uses natural preservatives, such as vitamin C (ascorbate) and vitamin E (tocopherols) – vitamins your pet needs and uses anyway. There is also the option to search out some of the more holistic alternatives when choosing a pet food. These products tend to strictly use only animal based protein, minimal grain, natural preservatives, and often state that they don't use rendered meat sources or preservatives such as BHA or ethoxyquin.

As with all bagged dog food it is important to look for an expiration date. The nutritional quality of any product left sitting on the shelf for months at a time should be brought into question. It is important to keep this in mind after the product is at home as well. The stability of vitamins and minerals, not to mention fats and proteins, left sitting out for extended periods of time is questionable at best.

An alternative to the more traditional pet foods is to feed your dog a diet that reflects their carnivorous nature, namely a raw meat diet. This diet has gained increasing popularity in recent years in part because it lends piece of mind, allowing you to know exactly what is and isn't in your pet's food. The diet is based on feeding raw meat from various animal sources, bones (both for recreation and as a part of the meal), organ meats (including liver, heart, tripe) and fruits and vegetables. Feeding in this manner allows you to provide a variety of fresh foods that contain natural sources of vitamins and minerals.

The lack of grains is also a plus for some because of the high incidence of grain allergies in dogs.

Most importantly let your pets overall health be your guide. Look for clues in things such as their overall energy level, whether they are at their ideal weight, and the condition of their coat. Are they constantly itchy? Licking or chewing their paws? How clean are their teeth? These are some of the signs you can use to assess how they are feeling. After all you are going to be the best judge of changes in their overall wellbeing. Ultimately the decision of how to feed your animals is going to be a personal one. The intent here is merely to provide you with information to make an informed choice.