

*The most common question we get asked is "What is the best food for my pet". I think this veterinarian has a good answer. His opinion is based on knowledge and observation, not blind faith in one of the 'Big' name brands.*

*Connie Roller, Manager*

## The Best Food To Feed A Dog

By T. J. Dunn, Jr., DVM

"What is the best food to feed a dog?" Every day veterinarians are asked that question by dog owners. It's a sincere question because most dog owners want to feed the very best to their furry friends. Good health begins with proper **nutrition**, regardless of price or convenience of acquisition.

Please understand that the entire discussion on this page relates to healthy dogs with no kidney, thyroid, food allergy or other abnormal conditions. Also, the content of this page is my opinion regarding the "best" dry food and how to determine what you think is "best" to feed dogs.

A big reason why it is strictly an opinion, there is no single answer to the question "What is the best diet to feed a dog?" Or if there is an answer it is, "It depends".

Over the past 37 years I have been examining dogs and cats in my practices I have made it a point to ask the owner "What diet are you feeding?" I have gotten all sorts of answers but in every case I relate the owner's response to what I am seeing in the patient. And over the years my suggestions regarding what to feed have changed.

Originally I took the pet food manufacturer's declarations as fact -- that an assortment of "Complete and Balanced" pet foods were perfectly nourishing because that wording was not legally permitted on pet food labels unless feeding trials demonstrated its veracity. I eventually discovered I was mistaken in the belief that any "Complete and Balanced" dog food was appropriate to feed.

It was in 1978 that I had an awakening. A number of clients were presenting dogs to me that had coarse hair coats and slightly greasy and flaky skin; and often these dogs (and cats!) had chronic itchy skin, hot spots, ear infections and seemed overweight.

So, they were over-caloried but under-nourished. Their calorie intake was up but the food they were consuming simply -- no matter that the pet food label indicated "Complete and Balanced" --was not providing a proper nutrient spectrum to the dog. Sometimes I would simply say that some fatty acid supplements "might help". I was a believer in those "Complete and Balanced" diets. One of the reasons I couldn't see what was going on regarding these dogs with poor health signals relating to diets was that some of the "Complete and Balanced" diets were resulting in well nourished dogs, partly because the owners were feeding table scraps as well.

I'll jump ahead a bit and tell you the defining element that separated the good "Complete and Balanced" diets from the poor ones was this: The poor diets were based on corn -- meaning, corn was listed as the first ingredient in the ingredient list on the label -- and the good diets were based on chicken or some other meat source -- lamb, beef.

I was always instructed, and learned in the few [nutrition](#) courses in veterinary school (nutrition is much better covered in veterinary school these days) that an imbalance of calcium and phosphorus in a [dog's diet](#) would lead to health disasters. This holds true today, too.

I was instructed that "since meat is high in phosphorus and lower in calcium, too much meat is not good for dogs over long periods of time". (Many people still confuse the disastrous all meat diets with meat-based diets; one is not good the other is ideal.) Grain-based diets for dogs, and even more so for cats, do not make nutritional sense and that was exactly why I was seeing those patients with the dry and flaky, sometimes greasy skin and coarse hair coats. They were eating "Complete and Balanced" grain-based diets with nothing else added. Why add anything when it is "Complete and Balanced" already?

Further confirmation came when I saw another litter owned by a local [Bloodhound](#) breeder. This fellow seemed to me to be quiet and a healthy ten-year-old dog with a shiny coat.

When I'd ask him what he was feeding his dogs we would get into our annual nutritional discussion and I'd keep warning him about the home-made recipe and all that meat he had been feeding his dogs for years.

Funny thing was, his dogs were among the very best I had ever seen. All his litters, and adult dogs, were robust, had perfect skin and coats even at six weeks of age, and never had to come in for skin problems, skeletal dysfunction, gastrointestinal problems or oral health issues. This breeder was sending his pups all over the country and there I was trying to tell him to be careful about "feeding too much meat" and I'd talk about such things as "a 'Complete and Balanced' commercial dog food would be best, make sure you don't get skeletal problems". I wondered why I felt rather foolish instructing him because I honestly thought his dogs were in optimum health.

The answer came to me, finally, on its own. It seeped into my consciousness after years of seeing a pattern. The key to the healthy dogs' diets was that they were consuming a diet based upon meat and the poor doers were eating diets based upon grain such as corn!

According to pet industry consultant Dave Geier of Geier Enterprises, Highlands Ranch, CO, "Pet food companies invest over \$100 million each year in research and development. This includes both basic research into new and improved formulations as well as the protocols to validate their efficacy."

All this ongoing research and development bodes well for dog owners because the more we know the better we become at taking care of the dogs and puppies in our lives. Geier goes on to say that, "The ingredients in some high-end pet foods have never been better."

I have noticed that today's meat-based diets are far superior to what was commercially available years ago. Dog owners are finally understanding the need for meat and poultry products as a foundation for superior nutrition for dogs. And the myth about "all that protein causing kidney damage" has finally gone the way of such proverbs as milk causing worms and ear cropping preventing ear infections.

Therefore, one of the parameters you need to know when you are trying to determine the best food to feed your dog is this: Is the diet meat-based or grain-

based? The meat-based diets are the best choice. (Remember, we're talking about normal dogs, not those with heart, thyroid or other abnormalities.)

I prefer chicken as the first (main) ingredient when I recommend a dog food because I have seen so many dogs on chicken-based diets that were in really excellent health. Lamb, turkey, fish, beef and venison all are good choices, too, but subtle nutritional variations in amino acid spectrum and the fatty acid composition contributed by the "meat" may be different when these protein sources are compared to chicken. That's just my opinion; don't stop feeding a lamb and rice diet if your dog looks and acts great!

Veterinary nutrition specialist Dan Carey is a co-author of an excellent text called *Canine and Feline Nutrition*, and numerous other published articles that all dog owners and breeders should read. He works in Research and Development at The Iams Company. He believes strongly that dogs should be fed properly well before any breeding activities begin.

“The bitch should be at or within five percent of her ideal body weight. Excess weight is associated with increased complications and excess weight in the final third of gestation is associated with over-sized puppies. Her fatty acid status should be normalized by feeding a diet that contains proper amounts and ratios of fatty acids. If she has had previous litters, each successive litter places a nutritional drain on her. One of the nutrient types that are depleted are fatty acids. If the bitch is fed a diet without a balanced ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids (5;1), her own fatty acid index will go down on successive litters.” Nursing dogs require a higher caloric intake of properly balanced food. So, what’s the best dog food to feed your dog? The answer is *it depends*. In truth, there seems to be no single dog food that is the best for all dogs and all puppies. So what should you look for in a high quality dog food?

Here’s what I suggest to my clients: Look at the dog food labels. In the GUARANTEED ANALYSIS look for the Protein content to be at least 30 percent, the Fat to be at least 18 percent, preservatives to be via Vitamin E and/or C and look for Omega Fatty Acid to be present. Supplementation can be harmful, especially calcium supplementation to a pregnant bitch. If a good quality dog food is being fed no special supplementation should be needed. If a supplement is required to make the dog look or feel better or whelp healthier pups, you should instead change the food.

Optimum nutrition demands that protein, fat, carbohydrate and micronutrients such as minerals, vitamins, and enzymes are in balance with each other. Therein lies the danger of a breeder supplementing an already properly formulated diet! Recall Geier's statement about all that research that's gone into the food's formulation. How are you to know what supplement to add and in what quantity to "improve" the foods' value? Should you be adding whole foods such as eggs, cottage cheese, or meat to the dog's diet?

Again, if a high quality, highly digestible commercial food is fed that meets the previously mentioned percentages of nutrients, adding table food may undo some of the balance and quantities of nutrients being fed to the dog.

So be cautious and self-critical about supplementing a dog's diet in the hope of improving an already balanced, scientifically established formula.

In conclusion: I recommend that a dog owner look at the pet food label. Look at the ingredient list and a meat such as chicken should be listed as the first ingredient. Look at the guaranteed analysis to see that the protein level is at 30 percent or more. The fat content should be at 18 percent or more. And if there is a rather wide spectrum of ingredients such as omega fatty acids and vitamin E, that's good, too. There should be **NO FOOD COLORING!**

If you find a few diets that meet this criteria, and there are quite a few from which to choose, you just might have the confidence that you are feeding the best dog food you can get.