

PFMA

Essentials for choosing pet food

There is no shortage of choice when it comes to buying pet food and to the uninitiated it can seem a dizzying array. The pet food industry regularly emphasises the importance of complete and balanced nutrition but what does this mean, why is it important and what do pet owners need to look for on the pet food label? Nicole Paley at the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association (PFMA) expands on this and more.

A HEALTHY BALANCED DIET FOR CATS AND DOGS

To keep healthy, happy and active for as long as possible, cats and dogs need the right balance of the six major nutrient groups in their diet: proteins, fats/oils, vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates and water. Dogs need 37 essential nutrients in their diet for healthy bodily function whilst cats need around 40. The expertise of the manufacturer is in selecting and blending ingredients together to provide meals that meet the nutritional needs of pets.

'COMPLETE' PET FOODS – WHAT DOES THE TERM MEAN?

This is probably the most important term for pet owners to be familiar with and it'd be useful to point out the term on the pet food packaging.

The term 'complete' is a legal definition and it means the product contains all the nutrients a pet needs for healthy bodily function. Feeding a complete diet means no additional food is needed. A 'complementary' pet food means the product isn't nutritionally complete and it will need to be fed alongside something else.

Whether recommending a wet or dry pet food, depends on which format the pet prefers along with what works well for the owner – many pets like a mix of both. Either way, if the product is labelled as 'complete' it will provide a balanced meal.

HOW DO MANUFACTURERS ENSURE A NUTRITIONALLY 'COMPLETE' DIET?

Owners may ask how manufacturers ensure their products are 'complete'. The answer is PFMA members follow European nutritional guidelines when producing their diets. These guidelines detail the nutritional needs of cats and dogs at the varying lifestages from growth through to senior.

The guidelines are approved by veterinary nutrition experts across Europe and they are reviewed annually to ensure they provide the latest science. The 2018 edition has recently been launched and it is available to download at www.fediacf.org.

DIETARY NEEDS AT DIFFERENT LIFE STAGES

Balanced and complete nutrition is important for all cats and dogs; however, their nutritional needs can vary at different stages in their lives. For instance, the nutritional needs of a growing puppy or kitten are quite different to an adult cat or dog that may be less active. As a pet progresses in to their senior years, their needs will change again. Diets have been specially formulated to meet specific nutritional needs at specific stages in life. These nutritional needs are accounted for in the European guidelines.



HOW MUCH TO FEED?

With the growing issue of pet obesity, take this opportunity to highlight the feeding guidelines to owners. The recommendations are usually based on the ideal healthy pet size, and sometimes take in to account their life stage and activity level. Although each pet will have their own unique needs, recommend to owners that they start with the recommended amounts before adjusting according to weight changes and activity level. Check that owners know their pet's weight, if they don't they need to find this out.

SIGNS THAT A PET IS DOING WELL ON THEIR DIET

- Key signs of a healthy, thriving pet are:
- A clean and shiny coat
- Clear, bright eyes
- A good weight and body shape
- Mouth should smell fresh and gums should be pink

ADVICE FOR ANY CHANGES TO DIET

Any sudden change in diet might cause tummy upsets. If switching diets, this should be done gradually over a period of five to seven days. Start by introducing a little of the new diet to the pet's regular food gradually increasing this over a few days whilst decreasing the old food. Again, encourage owners to check the feeding guidelines as these can vary between the different products and brands.

USEFUL RESOURCES ON PET NUTRITION FOR RETAILERS:

Working with its dedicated Veterinary Nutrition Group, PFMA has developed a series of factsheets on popular pet nutrition topics. These can be used for staff training or to share with customers. 🐾

FACTSHEETS INCLUDE:

- Understanding pet food labels
- Vegetarian diets for pets
- Responsible raw feeding
- Puppy nutrition
- Feeding indoor birds
- The importance of hay for rabbits

Please visit

<https://www.pfma.org.uk/fact-sheets>

