

PART 3

FOOD SERIES

LABELS MADE CLEAR



Nicole Paley explains the different, and sometimes confusing, terms on our cat food labels.

There has been a lot of attention in recent years on how meaningful food labels are and whether they provide all the information people need to achieve a healthy, balanced diet.

What is topical and relevant in the human food sector always extends to our cats' food — after all, they are another member of the family.

But what can surprise cat owners is that many cat food labels look quite different to labels on human foods. The reason for this is that when it comes to legislation, pet food labelling falls under EU rules for animal feed. Pet food doesn't come under the same rules for human food labelling, nor does it have its own set of rules.

This is useful to know as some of the terms you see on your cat's food labels are more tailored to the farmer than the owner. Take for instance, 'crude ash' (also known as 'incinerated residue' or 'inorganic matter'). Crude ash is in fact an indicator of the mineral content of pet food and includes nutrients such as calcium, phosphorus, sodium or magnesium. A fact well understood by farmers but not by most pet owners.

The law requires that the label contains certain key pieces of information, including a list of ingredients (referred to on the label as 'composition'), additives and a nutrition analysis (referred to as 'analytical constituents'), along with feeding guidelines.

CORRECT NUTRITION

One of the most important pieces of information on the label is whether the food is 'complete' or 'complementary'. The term 'complete' is a legal definition and the food must contain all the

nutrients a cat needs when fed as per the directions. This makes pet food unique and it's akin to having every meal prepared by a nutritionist. A 'complementary' cat food will need to be fed alongside something else to ensure your cat gets all the nutrition he needs, so always check the label.

WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?

So what information is provided on the label? Ingredients listed are in descending order by weight — they can be listed by their specific name (for example, chicken meat meal) or category names (such as meat and animal derivatives). With category descriptions, all the ingredients are not listed but the category is. If a product name draws special attention to certain ingredients, then the percentages of these ingredients must be declared.

The ingredients list needs to be cross-referenced with the 'analytical constituents', which shows the main nutrients in the food as percentage figures and includes protein (crude protein), fat content (crude oils or fat), crude fibre and crude ash (mineral content).

MAIN INGREDIENTS

Generally speaking, your cat needs a food with high levels of protein as well as some fat. Protein sources come in many forms; they can be animal-based like chicken, beef and fish, or they can be plant-based proteins such as grains and vegetables. The meat-based ingredients will be listed as 'meat and animal derivatives' or by their own individual name. The pet food industry uses by-products from the human food chain, for instance offal — an excellent source of protein for cats but

OUR EXPERT



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no longer favoured by the UK consumer. All ingredients must come from animals slaughtered under veterinary supervision.

Cereals such as corn (maize), rice, wheat, barley or sorghum, provide an important source of energy, a proportion of protein and other nutrients including thiamine and niacin. Certain fibres such as beet pulp or rice bran can also have additional benefits for the health of the digestive tract.

Other ingredients you may see on the label and want to know more about:

Additives per kg. This include vitamins, flavours, preservatives, antioxidants and colours. Most of the additives used in pet food are also used in our foods.

'Various sugars' is a category description which may refer to sucrose (cane sugar, commonly known as table sugar), fructose, glucose or even honey, all of which are natural products. Sugar may be added to cat food as an energy source. Cats can easily convert sugar into usable energy through normal digestion. ■

CUSTOMER CARE

Many pet food companies have customer care lines and website FAQs to answer any questions — contact details are on the label. For a guide to pet food labelling, visit www.pfma.org.uk