

Cats & Dogs –Feeding Them Appropriately

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A horse is a horse, a dog is a dog and a cat is a cat, even if they hang out together

One of the most common mistakes & injustices pet owners make is to feed their pets a species inappropriate diet. They feed their pets as if they were human. I see it done with horses all the time & more so with cats & dogs. Pet food manufacturers have a lot to do with this trend. They make pet food attractive & appealing to us because after all we are the ones with the checkbook. But using human nutritional guidelines for our furry friends can be detrimental.

If your dog is having skin allergy problems, frequent ear infections & bowel issues...look at his diet. If your cat is having urinary tract problems, gastro-intestinal issues like vomiting and/or diarrhea... look at his diet. If your pet's coat is not as shiny & soft as it could be...look at his diet.

Carnivores or Omnivores?

First of all, we have to understand & accept the fact that dogs and cats are carnivores, not omnivores or vegetarians. There is some controversy on whether dogs are omnivores or true carnivores. This argument is no doubt fueled by the canine's ability to survive on small amounts of meat & non-meat scraps that us humans provide for them. I hope I don't sound paranoid when I say that pet food manufacturers may have a lot to do with the perpetuation of this myth. It is much cheaper to make pet food with inexpensive fillers, like grains, vegetables & fruits than an all meat pet food.

But survival & optimum nutrition are two very different things. There are three distinct characteristics that confirm that cats & dogs are carnivores; their teeth, the lack of the enzyme amylase in their saliva & the anatomy of their digestive tract.

If you look at the teeth of the feline & canine species it is obvious that the narrow pointed back teeth were made for tearing & chopping, not grinding like the boxy back teeth of the omnivore (human) or herbivore (horse). So, this tells us they are anatomically designed to be meat eaters.

Also keep in mind that dogs & cats do not produce amylase in their salivary glands, the way humans do. Amylase is an enzyme that helps breakdown carbohydrates. Dogs actually do produce some amylase but it is in the small intestine & cats produce very low levels of amylase. This tells us that cats & dogs were not meant to process large quantities of starches (carbohydrates). In fact, in truth both dogs & cats have absolutely no dietary requirements for carbohydrates.

Carnivores eat larger meals, so proportionally have a larger stomach than say herbivores, which are designed to graze all day. Carnivores also produce a larger amount of stomach acid to digest animal protein more efficiently. A carnivore's digestive tract is 5-6 times their body length whereas the horse's digestive tract exceeds the length of their body by more than 10 lengths. This is more proof that cats & dogs are carnivores.

Although both cats & dogs are carnivores, it is important to note that there are some differences.



Feeding Dogs

The problem with most commercial dog & cat food is that it is designed to appeal to the pet owner. Lots of fruits & veggies are added because after all that is what is considered healthy for humans. Plus cereal grains and vegetable starches are cheap fillers. Unfortunately, it is these cheap fillers that cause many of our dogs' skin allergies & gastro-intestinal issues.

When looking for a commercial dog food, look for high protein with little to no carbohydrates.

Remember, dogs have absolutely no nutritional requirement for carbohydrates. However, fats are just as important as protein, as long as they are animal fats.

I keep a small bag of Orijen Adult kibble for dogs in our refrigerator (to keep it from going rancid), just in case I need to stretch our raw food meals for our dogs before our next scheduled raw food delivery.

I find it very interesting that most commercial dog foods do not give you the carbohydrate % on their analysis. I guess they figure pet owners can't figure it out. To figure out the carbohydrate percentages just add the protein, fat, moisture, fiber and if ash is not included, a safe guess is 3%. Add all these up, subtract from 100 & that should give you an approximate percentage of carbohydrates. But even if the carbohydrate number is low don't stop there. It is very important to look at the list of ingredients.

Of course, the ideal diet for a carnivore would be a raw food diet, but I'll be the first to tell you that it's time consuming. Even if you buy it already packaged, most of the time you have to break down the packages into smaller packages. I buy my raw food locally already ground, with muscle meat, organs & bone in the proper ratios. I also buy chicken necks & wings for more chewing activity, plus they really like them. But if I were unable to feed raw I would feed a no grain, low carbohydrate, high protein dry dog food (like Orijen) mixed in with a high quality canned food.



Feeding Cats

There are some very important differences between cats & dogs. Cats are strict carnivores, in other words their tolerance of carbohydrates is much less than that of dogs. Cats are meant to meet their nutritional needs with animal-based proteins (i.e. meats, organs, bone). Cats lack specific enzymes and therefore cannot utilize plant proteins as efficiently as dogs or humans. Plus plant-based proteins do not contain all the critical amino acids required by an obligate carnivore.

It is also very important to know that cats do not have the thirst drive that dogs have. Consequently, one of the worse foods you can give your cats is dry kibble. Cats get their fluids/water from fresh kill, which is 70-75% water. Check the moisture% in you cat's food. In my opinion, a total diet of dry kibble is a sure way to assure your kitty is dehydrated all the time. Dehydration can cause a whole slew of medical problems, which I will mention below.

The major drawbacks to feeding dry kibble to cats are: **not enough water, high in carbohydrates** & the use of **plant protein rather than animal protein**. Many health problems in cats are linked to the feeding of dry kibble, such as kidney disease, cystitis/urethral blockage-bladder/kidney stones, obesity often leading to diabetes and inflammatory bowel disease,.

Veterinarian Lisa Pierson has a very informative website on feline nutrition:

<http://www.catinfo.org/>

If you truly want to provide your cat with a healthy, species appropriate diet read through all of it, it will shock you. Much of what Dr. Pierson says is also in Dr. Kellon's Feeding the Dog and Cat course.

I have to confess that as hard as I have tried I have been unable to transition my cats to an all raw food diet (they will occasionally nibble on some ground turkey or a chicken heart or two). So, I have settled for second best which is a high quality canned food with an added tablespoon of water, for even better hydration. My cats like the Wellness no grain

canned foods (they prefer the minced rather than ground) & some of the Merrick grain free canned foods. Merrick's Cowboy Cookout is a big favorite. Dr. Pierson has a list on her website that lists the nutritional composition of many cat foods. I printed out the 35 page list & refer to it whenever I want to try a different canned food. I recently ordered the variety pack of Tiki canned foods from Pet Food Direct. Initially when trying out a new food I will usually get a couple of cans from a local Petco or Petsmart. Once I know my cats like it then I will order a case from Pet Food Direct or Amazon. I have saved up to 20 cents a can from Petco prices by buying a case on line; plus they frequently will have free shipping offers. With gas prices the way they are, for me it's a win-win situation.

Practice: Figuring Out Those Labels



This is By Nature Entrees-Rabbit Stew-one of my cats' favorites

Ingredients: Rabbit, Turkey Broth, Vegetable Broth, Turkey Liver, Egg, Bacon, Pea Flour, Natural Flavor, Potato Starch, Mushrooms, Carrots, Guar Gum, Salt, Cranberries, Sodium Tripolyphosphate, Alfalfa Meal, Tomatoes, Spinach, Thyme, Taurine, Calcium Carbonate, Choline Chloride, Potassium Chloride, Iron Proteinate, Zinc Proteinate, Manganese Proteinate, Copper Proteinate, Sodium Selenite, Calcium Iodate, Thiamine Mononitrate (Vitamin B1), Niacin Supplement (Vitamin B3), Vitamin E Supplement, d-Calcium Pantothenate (Vitamin B5), Pyridoxine Hydrochloride (Vitamin B6), Riboflavin Supplement (Vitamin B2), Biotin (Vitamin B7), Vitamin B12 Supplement, Vitamin D2 Supplement, Menadione Sodium Bisulfite Complex, Folic Acid (Vitamin B9).

Good! The first ingredient is rabbit, not rabbit meal or by products. Turkey broth is good, vegetable broth...hmmm... ok. I like the turkey liver, egg & bacon. Uh-oh! Pea flour, potato starch, etc. etc.

But, I'm not totally put off yet. Let's see exactly how much of these not so desirable ingredients constitute this food. Let's look at the analysis:

Guaranteed Analysis

-) Crude Protein (Minimum)8.0%**
-) Crude Fat (Minimum)3.5%**
-) Crude Fiber (Maximum)1.5%**
-) Moisture (Maximum)82.0%**
-) Ash (Maximum)2.9%**
-) Magnesium (Maximum)0.025%**
-) Taurine (Minimum)0.12%**

Adding the numbers, $8 + 3.5 + 1.5 + 82 + 2.9 = 97.9$

$100 - 97.9 = 2.1$

That leaves us with 2.1 % for carbohydrates. That is pretty darn good! Apparently those ingredients I was worried about constitute very minute amounts. My rule of thumb is not over 10% carbohydrates for either my dogs or cats. Evo Weight Management Dry Formula for dogs lists carbohydrates at no more than 11%. I can live with that especially since they only get a little bit now & then. Evo also makes a very decent dry cat food but, unfortunately, you still have the dehydration issue of kibble with cats. My cats' main diet is canned 3-4 times a day. However, I will let them nibble on some Evo or Orijen dry cat food morsels as treats or if I'm going to be away from home all day I will leave them about ½ cup of Evo dry so they don't go hungry. But as soon as I get home they're back on canned. Of course, it always makes me happy when they are willing to eat some tidbits of raw from the dogs' supply of raw food.

Some Myths...

Fish-contrary to popular belief fish is not good for cats. Fish can be high in mercury, high in PBDEs which are fire retardant chemicals linked to hyperthyroidism, and fish is also high in phosphorus. It is interesting to note that no vitamin K deficiency has ever been reported except in cats on diets very high in fish. Once in a while a meal of fish is okay but not on a regular basis.

Fiber-is a huge marketing ploy. Healthy carnivores do not require fiber for intestinal health. In fact, the structure (length) of their digestive tract does not support the value of fiber like it does in the equine species, for example. "Fiber is not considered an essential nutrient in your dog's diet, but it is present in almost every commercial dog food."
http://www.drsfostersmith.com/pic/article.cfm?dept_id=0&siteid=12&acatid=284&aid=460

To Summarize

I love all my animals with all my heart & try to give them the best nutrition I can. It's not about what is convenient for me but what is healthiest for them. Sometimes the ideal or best is not feasible & you have to compromise, like I did with my cats. I would much prefer they would eat raw food but they don't agree. So, I give them the healthiest canned food I can find. It all boils down to what you are willing to do for your animals. Just keep in mind that "Halfway measures get halfway results". I humbly borrow that saying from my friend & mentor, Dr. Eleanor Kellon.

About the author:

Claire C. Cox-Wilson is a moderator & longtime member of the on-line Equine Cushing's & IR Group and several of its sister groups. Claire, a retired RN with over fifty years of experience as a horse owner & a graduate of all of Dr. Kellon's nutrition courses,

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