

What's in a label?



Every ingredient in pet food serves a function.

Most pet food is designed to be “complete and balanced” which means each serving is a complete meal, and provides total nutrition in a way that tastes good to your dog or cat. Veterinary researchers have identified between 42 and 48 essential nutrients for cats and dogs, which are provided by the ingredients on the label.

Ingredients are required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) to be listed on a pet food label in descending order, based on weight and using the required technical names. As a result, pet food labels aren't always consumer-friendly.

A pet food ingredient can serve as a source for many nutrients:

Protein

Protein provides amino acids that help a pet build and maintain its muscles, bones, blood, organs, immune system and hair and nails. There are many combinations of protein sources that deliver a balanced amino acid profile. Think of the variety of protein sources that humans eat in order to thrive. One person might get protein from steak, chicken and fish, while another may get protein from grains, kale, and beans. Both can get a proper balance of amino acids in their diets through the consumption of various ingredients. On a pet food label, as noted above, these ingredients are listed by their technical names which include not only the source of the nutrient but also can include information about a process, if used, to make the ingredient, e.g., poultry byproduct meal, corn gluten meal, meat and bone meal, soybean meal, and whole grain like corn, barley and oats.

Fat

Fat is the first nutrient to be used for energy by your pet. Fat is made up of building blocks called fatty acids and in pet food may be supplied by ingredients such as those listed above under “Protein” or in concentrated sources of fat, examples of which are corn meal, canola, flaxseed or sunflower oils, and animal digest (clean animal tissue that has been cooked down, similar to giblet gravy). In addition to providing energy, fatty acids are essential for the development and function of your pet's muscles, immune system, nerves, heart, brain, eyes and other tissues. They also help your pet's body to absorb fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E and K) and to keep his or her skin and coat healthy.

Carbohydrate

Carbohydrate is an important source of energy for your dog or cat, supplying the building blocks (glucose) for cellular energy, which spares protein to support other body functions. Carbohydrate also provides the fiber in pet diets which is important for gut health and gut motility. Carbohydrate sources in pet food can include whole grain corn wheat, brown rice, oats, potatoes for energy, and wheat bran, rice bran, soybean hulls, beet pulp, and fructooligosaccharides, for fiber.

Vitamins, minerals, and additional amino acids

While vitamins and minerals are added in very small amounts, they account for close to half of the ingredients in a pet food, and make up the longest part of the ingredient list on the label. The AAFCO Nutrient Profiles contain 23 and 25 essential vitamins and minerals for dogs and cats, respectively. Again, the sources of these vitamins and minerals are required to be listed on the label by their true chemical name. Some pet foods will contain additional essential amino acids, such as lysine and methionine.



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