

Busting Nutritional Myths

Kara M. Burns, MS, MEd, LVT, VTS (Nutrition), VTS Hon (Internal Medicine, Dentistry)

Proper nutrition is essential to maintaining the health of pets and is one of the most important factors in managing disease in pets. As clients become more aware of the importance of nutrition in their own health, they will expect this same higher standard of nutritional care for their pets. The veterinary healthcare team should be the preferred, expert source of the best nutritional information for pets.¹ Veterinary teams that understand and promote clinical nutrition and demonstrate in-clinic behaviors consistent with this conviction will benefit their patients, their clients, and their practices. Proper nutritional management is one of the most important factors in maximizing health, performance, and longevity in addition to managing disease conditions.

Pet parents are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of nutrition in their own health; thus, they will expect this same standard of nutritional care for their pets. The veterinary healthcare team should be the preferred, expert source of the best nutritional information for pets.¹ Veterinary healthcare teams that understand and promote proper nutrition and demonstrate in-clinic behaviors consistent with this conviction will benefit their patients, their clients, and their practices.²

Pet owners and veterinary healthcare team members have access to a great deal of information regarding pet nutrition via the internet, news sources, blogs, etc. Along with this wealth of information comes confusing and often incorrect nutritional information. As veterinary nurses we need to educate ourselves on proper companion animal nutrition and sort through the minutiae to educate well intentioned owners on what constitutes proper nutrition for their pet. There is a lot of misinformation regarding pet food; veterinary teams should be viewed as the expert when it comes to veterinary medical questions, including proper nutrition.

Every patient that presents to the hospital should be assessed to establish nutritional needs and feeding goals, which are dependent upon the individual patient's physiology and/or disease condition. This nutritional assessment should be performed every time the patient presents to the hospital. The role of the veterinary nurse is to ascertain patient history, score the patient's body condition, work with the veterinarian to determine the proper nutritional recommendation for the patient, and communicate this information to the pet owner.

To discuss marketing gimmicks and pet food myths, we must begin with a basic understanding of the pet food label. The pet food label is the primary means by which product information is communicated from the manufacturer or distributor to pet owners, veterinarians, health care team members, and regulatory officials. Reading and interpreting pet food labels is one method that healthcare team members and pet owners can obtain information about pet

foods; however, labels do not necessarily provide information about food quality (e.g., digestibility and biological value).

Pet food labels not only communicate information about the product, but also serve as a legal document. Several agencies and organizations regulate production, marketing, and sales of pet foods in different countries. Each agency has different responsibilities with varying degrees of authority. Some of these agencies regulate information found on pet food labels whereas others influence the regulatory process. Pet foods are regulated at their point of sale (e.g., foods manufactured in the United States (US) but sold outside the US must meet labeling requirements of the country in which the food is sold). Pet foods sold in the US must conform to Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) and state pet food labeling requirements.

Pet food labels include two main parts: 1) the principal display panel and 2) the information panel. Understanding pet food labels is paramount to helping owners understand some of the marketing tactics as well as gaining clearer insight regarding many of the myths that are in the profession today. This presentation will review pet food labels and how misunderstandings result from the information that is found on (or is not found on) the pet food label.

Additionally, we will explore several long held beliefs which pet owners use in choosing the food that they believe to be appropriate for their pet. Grain Free, by-products, natural, human grade, etc., are all terms that are used by today's pet owner. Do these terms hold true meaning?

By-Products

A byproduct is something produced from the making of another product. By-products are not by definition poor quality. For instance, Vitamin E is a by-product of soy. By-products are simply secondary products produced in addition to the principal product. Additionally, there are several human foods which contain by-products – so it is not just something found in pet foods. For example, by-products of human milk production would be ice cream, cheese, and butter. Veterinary healthcare teams need to educate owners that by-products can be an excellent source of nutrients for pets as well as people.

In relation to pet foods, by-products are generally parts of the animals that are not the muscle meat preferred by most American consumers. The term refers only to the anatomic parts included, not to the nutritional quality of the parts. AAFCO defines a meat by-product as “the non-rendered, clean parts, other than meat, derived from slaughtered mammals. It includes, but is not limited to, lungs, spleen, kidneys, brain, livers, and stomachs and intestines freed of their contents. It does not include hair, horns, teeth and hooves ...”³

Furthermore, it is important to note that many of the items included in “by-product” (e.g., organ meats) may be higher in nutrients essential to the pet such as amino acids, minerals, and vitamins. Also, pets find these to be more palatable than skeletal muscle meat. Interestingly,

many popular dog treats (e.g., bully sticks [bull penis], lung, liver, pig ears, tendons, etc.) are actually items that would be appropriately classified under the label of “by-product”.

Grain Free

Pet parents believe that grain-free diets are better for their pets. Grain-free diets are assumed to be more natural, carbohydrate free, and less likely to result in health problems, especially allergies, in their pet. However, this is NOT the case.

To date, there has not been any credible evidence, nor any nutritional foundation supportive of grain free diets as being ‘better’ for pets. Veterinary healthcare teams must educate pet owners regarding the difference between nutrients and ingredients. Pets need nutrients to maintain health. Ingredients are the vehicles that provide those nutrients. Nutrition can be defined as the relationship of food and nutrients to health. Proper nutrient intake is essential to normal development, overall health, and disease management in companion animals. Nutrients have numerous metabolic roles essential to normal physiologic function that can be compromised by insufficient or irregular intake.⁴

Pet owners are under the misperception that whole grains may be ‘fillers’ in pet foods. The term filler implies that the ingredient has little or no nutritional value.^{5,6} Whole grains do contribute vital nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and essential fatty acids to pet foods.⁷ Various grain products also provide protein which may be easier for the pet to digest versus certain protein from meat. Realistically, most dogs and cats are able to utilize and digest (>90%) nutrients from grains normally found in pet foods.^{5,6}

Summary

Pet owners want and expect the very best for their pets. However, the information that pet owners are given is sometimes well-intentioned, but misleading. The veterinary healthcare team should focus on proper nutrition for every pet that presents to their hospital. To do this, the healthcare team must perform a complete nutritional history and patient assessment and be knowledgeable about the wide variety of foods that are on the market today. Not all foods are created equal and pet foods labels can be misleading and misinterpreted. It is important for the veterinary team to understand pet food labels, the evidence behind some of today’s beliefs, and not be afraid of the question – “what should I feed my pet?”

References

1. Burns KM. Nutrition: Is the new emphasis a fad? *Veterinary Team Brief*, 2014, 5:8-9.
2. Burns KM. The Dreaded Question: What Should I Feed My Pet? *Veterinary Team Brief*. January 2015. Pp. 13-14.
3. Association of American Feed Control Officials. Feed Terms and Ingredient Definitions. 2017 AAFCO Official Publication, page 359.

4. Gross KL, Yamka RM, Choo C, Friesen KG, et al. Macronutrients. In *Small Animal Clinical Nutrition 5th Ed.* Hand M, Thatcher, Remillard R, Roudebush P, Novotny B, eds. 2010, Mark Morris Institute, Topeka, KS. Pp. 49-105.
5. Laflamme D, Izquierdo O, Eirmann L, Binder S. Myths and Misperceptions about ingredients used in commercial pet foods. In *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice; Clinical Nutrition.* Laflamme D, Zoran DL, eds. July 2014, Pp 689-698. Elsevier, St. Louis.
6. Ograin VL, Burns KM. Nutritional Considerations in Allergic Skin Disease. *The NAVTA Journal.* 2016 Convention Issue. Pp. 12 – 19.
7. <http://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2016/06/grain-free-diets-big-on-marketing-small-on-truth/> Accessed 8-23-19.

Resources

www.wsava.net

www.petnutritionalliance.org