



Bone of contention

Watching your pet's diet can make a huge difference to their health. We take a closer look at the quality of commercial pet food and at different feeding practices.

Cats and dogs make excellent companions, particularly for people who live alone. Studies have shown that the presence of a pet can help to reduce the stress levels of their owner by increasing the release of endorphins, or 'feel-good hormones', in the body.

Pets require a lot of care however, and it is important to pay close attention to what they are fed. Just like us, our pets need a balanced diet with specific amounts of nutrients. A cat's diet should be about fifty-fifty for meat and carbohydrates, while dogs can thrive on roughly 25% meat and 75% carbohydrates. Poor quality food can cause harmful effects and lead to obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

Puppy fat

Research undertaken in 2008 by veterinary charity the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) found that over 30% of UK dogs are overweight or obese. To find out if your pet is overweight the PDSA recommends that you feel along their chest and backbone. You should be

able to feel the ribs and spine easily but they should not be visible. Also, by looking at your pet you should be able to see their waist tucking in just before the hips. One way to reduce weight of your pet is to control portion sizes and stick to a feeding schedule. Dog treats in particular can be high in calories. If a constant supply of food is left out, cats will graze frequently, which can cause obesity. Walking your dog daily and taking cats outside regularly to play is advisable.

A profitable industry

Pet ownership drives the demand for the production of commercial pet food, and the industry is extremely competitive. Large companies spend millions of euro on advertising to maintain their market share, and this advertising can be very convincing. As one cat owner, Anne Marie Connolly, says, "The cats in the ad are really healthy looking. I think it's called Kite Kat...I'm so used to buying it I don't even know its name. I'm built into a routine of just picking it up and

putting it in my trolley."

Mars Inc. claims leadership of the Irish pet-care sector, with almost a 60% share. Mars Pedigree (for dogs) and Whiskas (for cats) are the market leaders while their other brands include Cesar, Sheba, Pal, Kitekat, Catsan, and Frolic. Increased spending on pet-related goods and services has led to predictions that the market could be worth between €170 million and €200 million within the next five years.

Pet food basics

The production of pet food is a highly automated process. Heating, cooking, rendering, freezing, dehydrating, canning and extruding can alter or destroy nutrients, so vitamins and minerals are usually added to compensate. Pet foods also contain preservatives to ensure a long shelf-life. Certain chemical preservatives should be avoided but this is difficult since there are no specific requirements for listing these.

The most commonly fed pet foods are purchased in tins or pouches from

AT A GLANCE

Pet food industry.

Dietary requirements.

Pet food labelling.

supermarkets. Wet foods refer to tinned products, and dry foods are complete, biscuit-based diets. Fresh water should always be available to your cat or dog especially when they are fed dry foods. Guidelines on packaging indicate how much to feed.

Feeding cats

Cats require a diet high in protein and should not be fed a vegetarian diet because they cannot synthesise taurine, an essential amino acid found in meat. However, a diet consisting solely of red muscle meat is not sufficient for cats (or dogs) as it does not provide enough calcium for their bones. It is also important to note that some cats become intolerant of the lactose in milk when they reach about 12 weeks of age. Live bio yoghurt may be more easily digested. It is thought that chocolate, garlic, grapes, onions, raisins and tomatoes are toxic to cats.

Feeding dogs

Protein is essential to a dog's body so meat should make up about 20% to 30% of each meal. Consider your dog's size, weight, activity, age and level before choosing the best quality food possible, and make sure the feed is measured correctly. Some breeds only need to be fed once or twice a day. In their nutritional guidelines for pet foods, the European Pet Food Industry Federation FEDIAF (see *Useful websites*) lists milk, beef, eggs, cereals and dairy products as proteins against which dogs and cats can potentially react. Alcohol, avocados, chocolate, coffee, garlic, grapes, macadamia nuts, mushrooms, onions, tea, tobacco and raisins are thought to be toxic to dogs.

Commercial versus raw feeding

Raw feeding is based on Dr. Ian Billinghurst's BARF (Bones and Raw Food) Diet which entails feeding mainly uncooked meat and bones to pets. Supporters of raw feeding are usually opposed to commercial pet foods, which they consider poor substitutes for the 'natural' diet animals would have in the wild. However such feeding practices may jeopardise the health of your pet. Veterinary surgeon Jenny Moffet says "The whole veterinary profession is divided on feeding practices. Some people have managed raw feeding successfully but balancing the nutrient requirements is difficult and deficiencies

can cause damage to an animal's musculoskeletal system and to their kidneys. I have seen a lot of injuries caused by bones obstructing or lacerating their digestive system. Cooked bones in particular are prone to splintering and a further problem is that parasites can be passed to pets from uncooked meat."

She adds that many vets will recommend dried food or a mixture of dried and canned food for cats and dogs. "Dried food is more economical, particularly for feeding larger pets and is anecdotally better for their teeth and gums. However moist food is the best way to get fluid into your pet especially if they are not drinking enough water." She advises pet owners to ask their vet for advice about the most suitable product for their particular animal. "Although a growing proportion of people purchase pet food from supermarkets, pet shops and veterinary practices often have a wider range of high quality pet foods. Your vet can also provide specialist advice on the best products to feed."

Pet food recalls

There was a major recall of cat and dog foods in the US in 2007 in response to reports of renal failure in pets. Vets subsequently reported more than 100 pet deaths amongst nearly 500 cases of kidney failure. Most of the recalled product came from Menu Foods. Scientists discovered high levels of melamine, a chemical used in plastics and fertilisers, in wheat gluten and rice protein concentrate imported from China. The melamine had been added to the ingredients to misleadingly increase their protein content. The recall was followed by widespread public outrage and calls for government regulation of pet foods to replace the self-regulation of the industry by pet food manufacturers.

Labelling requirements

Under EU legislation, the following labelling information must be displayed on 'feedingstuff' or 'petfood':

- **Feed materials** Amount contained or in descending order by weight.
- **Vitamins** Levels of Vitamins E, A and D and copper, if present.
- **Additives** (Need not be named if they are on an EC approved list.)

Pet food labels are only required to show a chemical analysis of the food contained. An analytical declaration of ingredients is optional and there seem to be major differences between the

definition of certain ingredients and how they must be declared on the label. For example, the 1996 Council Directive on the circulation of feed materials describes meat meal as "Product obtained by heating, drying and grinding whole or parts of warm-blooded land animals from which the fat may have been partially extracted or physically removed. The product must be substantially free of hooves, horn, bristle, hair and feathers, as well as digestive tract content. (Minimum crude protein content 50% in dry matter). (Maximum total phosphorus content: 8%)". However, when labelling, the only compulsory declaration for meat meal is "Crude protein, Crude fat, Crude ash, Moisture, if > 8 %."

In March 2008, the European Commission presented a proposal for a new framework regulation on the labelling and marketing of feed and pet food. The proposal suggests that voluntary labelling codes for pet food be laid down. However a complete and compulsory list of ingredients with proper product identification is necessary to ensure proper information is available to the consumer. To avoid misleading customers, manufacturers could endeavour to provide the exact weight percentages of the contents of their products.

Brands examined

Consumer Choice examined the ingredients on the labels of six brands of canned dog food available in Irish supermarkets (see table). Prices for a standard 400g tin (Lidl sells an 800g tin, PAL weighs 385g) varied although the ingredient lists are all very similar to one another. None of the labels we examined gave the exact amount of any named meat contained in the product. 'Meat and Animal derivatives, minimum 4% beef' (or chicken etc)' is usually the first ingredient. A pet food label that says "...with beef or "with" any ingredient(s) must have at least 4% beef (or any other named ingredient) in the formula. The minimum is indicated, so a consumer buying pet food 'with 4% minimum of beef' is told that there is some beef in the product but they may not know that the main ingredient can include a high quantity of unnamed meat derivatives which are never listed.

Many brands use a little lean meat and add meat by-products or derivatives, the left over parts of meat and cereals not required by the human food industry, to make up the balance. Dogs and cats in

Useful websites

The European Pet Food Industry Federation
www.fedif.org

People's Dispensary for Sick Animals
www.pdsa.org.uk

DOG FOODS COMPARED

	Manufacturer	Price (€)	Weight (g)	Price per 100g (€)	Purchased
Dogfood (Lidl)	Lidl	0.79	800	0.10	Lidl
Dunnes Stores Classic Chunks'n'Gravy with Beef & Poultry	Dunnes Stores	0.67	400	0.17	Dunnes Stores
Earl's Healthy Balance Premium Chunks with lamb in jelly	Aldi	0.59	400	0.15	Aldi
Pal with Chicken & Beef in Jelly	Mars Ireland	0.89	385	0.23	Superquinn
Pedigree with Beef & Poultry in Gravy	Mars Ireland	0.97	400	0.24	Tesco
Tesco Meat in Jelly with Beef	Tesco	0.74	400g	0.19	Tesco

WHAT'S IN A CAN?

Consumer Choice looked at the contents of canned dog foods earlier this year.

- **Dogfood (Lidl)**
Meat and animal derivatives (meats 4%), Cereals, Minerals, Derivatives of vegetable origin. *Typical Analysis:* Protein 6%, Oils and Fats 4%, Ash 2%, Fibre 0.4%, Moisture 79%, Vitamins A, D3, E
- **Dunnes Stores Classic Chunks'n'Gravy with Beef & Poultry**
Meat and Animal Derivatives, (Beef min. 4%, Poultry min 4%), Cereals, Fish and Fish Derivatives, Minerals, Various Sugars, Coloured with EC Additives. *Typical Analysis:* Moisture 81%, Protein 7.5%, Fat 5%, Ash 2.5%, Fibre 0.5%, Vitamin E, Cu
- **Earl's Healthy Balance Premium Chunks with lamb in jelly**
Meat and Animal Derivatives (Lamb 4% Minimum), Cereals, Minerals, Coloured with EC Additives. *Typical Analysis:* Moisture 80%, Protein 8.0%, Oils and Fats 6.5%, Ash 2%, Fibre 0.5%, Vitamin A, D3, E
- **Pal with Chicken & Beef in Jelly**
Meat and animal derivatives (min. 4% chicken, min. 4% beef). Cereals. Derivatives of vegetable origin. Minerals. Contains EEC permitted colorants and preservatives. *Typical Analysis:* Protein 5%, Oil 4.5%, Ash 2.5%, Fibre 0.3%, Moisture 81%, Copper as copper sulphate, Vitamins A, D3, E
- **Pedigree with Beef & Poultry in Gravy**
Meat and Animal Derivatives (including min 4% beef, min.4% poultry, min 4% fresh meat), cereals, derivatives of vegetable origin, vegetable protein extracts, oils and fats, minerals. With colourants (permitted EC additives). *Typical Analysis:* Protein 8%, Oil 5.5%, Ash 2%, Fibre 0.8%, Moisture 79%, Vit D3, E
- **Tesco Meat in Jelly with Beef**
Meat and Animal Derivatives (Beef 4% minimum). Cereals, Minerals, Contains EC Permitted Colourants. *Typical Analysis:* Moisture 82%, Protein 7%, Oil 6%, Ash 2.5%, Fibre 0.5%, Vitamin A, D3, E

Information correct as at 7 January 2009.

the wild naturally eat the bones, intestines and organs of their prey. However it is hard for consumers to gauge the quality of the nutrients available from commercial pet food without knowing the source of derivatives, a generic term that could mean any animal or animal parts are used. Cereals and 'derivatives of vegetable origin' are also commonly written on labels but some dogs have difficulty digesting wheat and other grains. It is worrying that manufacturers are not required to specify the exact contents. Pet food labels do not provide

information on calorie content so consumers are also unable to compare the energy content of different brands.

Consumer Choice contacted the manufacturers, namely Aldi, Dunnes Stores, Lidl, Mars Ireland and Tesco, to request more comprehensive information regarding the contents and in particular the 'derivatives' used in the cans we looked at. We also contacted Irish Dog Foods Ltd and C&D Foods. However, we did not receive a single response providing the specific information we requested. A representative from Lidl would only provide the label that we

already had from their can of 'Dogfood' while an Aldi representative said that "due to specification and recipe confidentiality we are not in a position to provide you with this information." The Irish Pet Food Association said the industry "uses by-products from the human food chain... Manufacturers may therefore use ingredients from different animal species based on supply levels. Listing ingredients by category means producers can select ingredients based on supply without having the high cost of changing labels constantly." They stressed that stringent legislation ensures animal based materials used in pet foods come from animals which have passed veterinary inspections as fit for human consumption. Although we fully accept this point we made a final request for a sample description of the ingredients and percentage breakdown of the contents of a typical can of dog food. However, a representative told us that the Irish Pet Food Association does not collate this information. It leaves us to wonder exactly why all of our requests were either ignored by the industry or answered in an unsatisfactory manner.

Report by
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choice comment

Pet food is increasingly being marketed in similar ways to human food but the labelling requirements for pet food are far from equal. We need specific ingredients and weights to be listed on pet food labels so consumers can make more informed choices. Commercial diets are certainly convenient but a human being could not expect to thrive on a 100% processed diet from a packet or a tin and it does not seem feasible that a dog or cat could either. Variety is the key to ensuring your pet obtains all the nutrients it needs. Making even some of your animal's food at home lets you control the quality of the ingredients but this may not be possible due to financial and time constraints, and formulating a balanced diet can prove difficult. Always ask your vet for help if you are unsure. What works for one pet may not work for another so any new foods should be introduced gradually and discontinued if any negative changes occur.