

Grains Are Good Food: Helping Caregivers Move Beyond the Grain-Free Diet Trend

In the early 2000s, the “low-carb diet” became the newest strategy for health- and weight-conscious humans looking for a new way to slim down and live longer. White breads and pastas became taboo, along with many foods rich in complex carbohydrates, like whole grains. It wasn't long before adherents wondered if their canine and feline family members might benefit from a similar plan. When in 2007 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recalled hundreds of dog and cat foods made with contaminated wheat gluten, it stoked nascent concerns about grains in general as a food for companion animals, and soon an idea became a trend became an international movement. Commercial food developers responded, and grain-free dog and cat foods became the preferred choice of well-intentioned, but less-well-informed, caregivers – that is, until 2018 when the FDA released a new report that forced everyone to take a step back and ask serious questions about whether grain-free food was such a good idea after all. Now, caregivers are confused, and it's our job to help them find answers.

It's been more than a decade since grain-free food became one of the fastest-growing trends in commercial diets for dogs and cats. The trend influenced home-prepared diet plans as well, as caregivers incorrectly believed their canine and feline companions were inherently either unable to digest foods like corn, wheat, and rice or would show signs of food sensitivities or allergies if they tried. As the movement took hold, all manner of canine and feline illnesses and ailments – from skin eruptions and gastrointestinal disruptions to eye discharges and coughs – were attributed to consumption of even small amounts of grain. The commercial food industry was listening, and countless brands introduced formulas proudly bearing a “grain-free” label. By 2018, the grain-free segment was the most popular in the market.

That changed in July 2018 with the FDA announcement of a troubling number of reports of dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) among dogs eating a grain-free diet, including breeds not normally prone to DCM. The announcement, and updates that followed, made clear that there was no clear correlation between any ingredient in those diets and elevated incidence of illness. Efforts to identify a cause are ongoing, with no conclusive evidence to date that a single food or combination of foods is the culprit. There remains uncertainty whether a correlation exists at all, given the small number of dogs affected.

Still, consumer response to the initial FDA announcement was clear and swift. The popularity of grain-free foods plummeted, and continues to decline as caregivers search for a commercial food that will meet nutritional needs and also keep their dogs and cats safe. Sales of grain-inclusive foods have rebounded, despite a lack of clear guidance provided to the general public about whether grains should be included in diets for dogs and cats. As a result, caregivers are confused – and worried – as they struggle to make optimal food choices for their nonhuman friends.

It's time to take a measured look at what we know about grains as a food source for dogs and cats, and develop

a strategy for walking back the misinformation that has demonised this entire food group, so we can readily explain to caregivers why grains are, in fact, good food.

Dispelling the Myths

To effectively address concerns of caregivers and counter the misinformation they've relied on for years, we need to understand the origins of the notion that grains are a poor choice. Two false assumptions are among the most common reasons caregivers cite:

- Myth 1: Grains are not a natural part of the canine or feline diet.
- Myth 2: Grains (or gluten) intrinsically trigger allergies and food sensitivities in dogs and cats

A natural diet

When dogs and cats are valued as members of the family, guardians strive to provide care on a par with human family members. For example, the desire to adopt a more “natural” diet has gone mainstream in recent years as consumers strive to make healthier choices for themselves, with a corresponding desire to provide a more natural diet for their nonhuman companions. That's a good thing if it means foregoing processed foods in favor of minimally processed whole foods.

Unfortunately, the outcome is more complicated than that because, when it comes to dogs and cats, there are misconceptions about what constitutes a “natural” diet. It's widely assumed that dogs and cats should eat the way wolves and tigers eat, with the further assumption that wolves and tigers eat meat and little else. Therefore, the thinking goes, a natural diet for dogs and cats should be based primarily on meat, with little or no room for grains and other higher-carbohydrate foods.

The simple truth is that dogs are not wolves and our domestic cats are not tigers. After millennia of domestication, our household companions have diverged dramatically from their wild ancestors in many ways, including the foods they can, and readily do, consume. Both dogs and cats are in fact capable of digesting carbohydrates, and in fact thrive on diets that include grains and other higher-carbohydrate foods.

Allergies and sensitivities

Perhaps the most common reason caregivers avoid grains is the belief that their dogs or cats will have an allergic reaction. Whenever a skin or gastrointestinal disorder emerges, many are quick to look for a cause in the diet; in fact, the decision to choose a grain-free commercial food is often based on a desire to eliminate or prevent those problems.

While it's true that diet can be a culprit in any number of health issues, grains or other high-carbohydrate foods are rarely the cause. Many caregivers are surprised to learn that allergies and sensitivities to grains are exceedingly rare, and that their companions are far more likely to be allergic to animal proteins, including chicken, beef, dairy, and, particularly in cats, fish.

Perhaps the most common, unacknowledged cause of food-related illness involves feeding the same diet for extended



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periods of time. That's typically the scenario in those rare cases in which an animal is found to have an allergy or sensitivity to a particular grain, or to grains in general (or, for that matter, to animal protein). Animals who eat the same foods every day are susceptible to allergies and sensitivities as well as nutritional deficiencies, all of which can lead to a range of health issues. Since the nutritional needs of every animal are unique, it's difficult for any single commercial food or home-prepared recipe—even when conscientiously and carefully developed—to meet the precise needs of every animal. And when a dog or cat is exposed to the same food sources for weeks, months, or longer, the risk that he or she will develop an allergy or a sensitivity to that food is elevated. A lack of variety in the diet is a factor to consider whenever a skin or gastrointestinal problem exists. Fortunately, the solution in these cases is often quite simple: Switch to a diet based on a variety of food sources, drawing on different ingredients from one day to the next. (For a more detailed discussion of this matter see "A New Approach to Optimizing Nutrition for Dogs and Cats" by this author in the Summer 2021 issue of this Journal.)¹

There are other dietary factors that may potentially cause health problems unrelated to a reaction to grain or any other particular food item.

- Many animals are sensitive to chemical additives in the diet, such as preservatives, flavourings, or colourings.
- We can't rule out the possibility that genetically modified organisms or residue of agricultural chemicals in conventionally produced ingredients may be a factor.
- Environmental toxins may be a factor even in organically produce foods.
- There's a real possibility that the problem may not be an allergy or sensitivity at all, but an imbalance in the diet. Too much or too little protein or fat can cause skin eruptions, gastrointestinal disturbances, or other symptoms often associated with allergies or sensitivities.

Once again, all of these issues are exacerbated when the animal is fed the same diet every day.

Finally, the reality is that diet may not be the problem at all. Symptoms are actually more likely to be a reaction to an environmental trigger, such as fleas, grass, pollen, or chemicals in the home or yard; flea and tick treatments; or a parasitic, viral, or bacterial infection.

A Valuable Source of Nutrition

Presented as a whole, the above factors make it easy to demonstrate that villainising grains can easily lead a caregiver astray in her efforts to avoid a health problem for her animal friend, or cause her to miss the true cause of an existing problem. But when a client has for years been vigilant about avoiding grains of any kind, pointing out the many other, more likely causes of health problems may be less than reassuring. A discussion of the many benefits of adding grains back into the diet is the next step.

Simply stated, whole grains are loaded with nutrition. The proportion of carbohydrates, proteins, and fats differs with each type of grain, as does the micronutrient profile. But across the board, these foods contain an abundance of nutrients that are essential for a healthy diet. Helping caregivers to understand the essential role of those nutrients in maintaining health will go a long way in building confidence as they incorporate grains into the diet. The following are a few key points that will help make that case:

- **Carbohydrates:** The fact that grains are a higher-carbohydrate food is an oft-cited reason many caregivers shy away. What they may not realise is that this macronutrient is a primary source of energy for the body, and essential for healthy function of organs and the central nervous system.
- **Fibre:** Whole, unrefined grains provide the soluble and insoluble fibre that, unlike other carbohydrates, pass through the body undigested. It normalises the consistency of the stool, and aids in preventing diarrhoea and constipation. Perhaps even more important is its role as a prebiotic – that is, it provides nutrition for the intestinal flora that are so important in maintaining an animal's good health. For a dog or cat who is obese, increasing the amount of fibre in the diet can reduce the caloric intake while allowing the animal to feel satiated.
- **Protein:** Caregivers often don't think of grains as an important protein source. But ½ cup of cooked brown rice contains about 2.5 grams of protein, ½ cup of oatmeal has 3 grams of protein, and a typical slice of whole wheat bread adds 3.5 grams of protein to the meal.
- **Micronutrients:** The trend among humans to reduce the amount of carbohydrates in their own diet ignores the critical role of micronutrients available in whole grains, and the same applies to the grain-free approach to feeding their dogs and cats. All family members will benefit from a reminder that these foods provide vitamins, minerals, enzymes, antioxidants, and phytochemicals that are not available in animal-derived foods.

Considering the contribution grains can make to a healthy, balanced diet, it's worth considering whether their absence may be a factor if suspicions are confirmed that there's an elevated risk of DCM in dogs eating a grain-free diet. With an entire class of foods is excluded, the more limited range of ingredients used may increase the chances of a micronutrient deficiency in the end product. The possibility



that such a deficiency is related to the higher incidence of DCM is potentially a subject for future research.

A Better Choice

Concerns about grains as a likely cause of illness in dogs and cats are unfounded. Excluding them from the diet is unnecessary, and in fact restricts opportunities to provide companions with a balanced diet that allows the animal to draw nutrients from a broad range of food sources.

The strategies outlined here are offered as a way to encourage caregivers to embrace grains as a valuable food source for their dogs and cats, and may on that basis help to inform veterinary practitioners' interactions with clients. They also provide marketing points that producers of commercial diets can apply to build confidence among caregivers as they make the switch to grain-inclusive foods. In both scenarios, the optimal outcome will be a new and growing trend that sees caregivers providing their canine and feline friends with foods that deliver a more balanced nutritional profile based on a broader, more healthful range of ingredients.

As consumers become better informed, they'll make better choices, whether they purchase commercial foods or prepare companions' meals at home. Their dogs and cats will benefit, to be sure. But as including a greater proportion of grains in the diet makes it possible to reduce the amount of animal-derived ingredients, it also carries environmental benefits, including the potential to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases generated by our food production system. And of course, there's a benefit to the animals used for food. If our dogs and cats can thrive on a diet less reliant on chickens, cows, pigs, and lambs as food sources, we can extend our care and compassion to those species as well.

REFERENCES

1. Allegretti, Jan. A New Approach to Optimizing Nutrition for Dogs and Cats. *International Animal Health Journal*, Vol. 8, issue 2, 30-32.



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