

The Single Most Important Ingredient in an Optimally Nutritious Diet for Dogs and Cats

Conscientious manufacturers of dog and cat foods strive to create balanced, nutritionally complete foods for the animals they serve. Many attentive caregivers choose to feed home-prepared meals by following a recipe formulated by a veterinary nutritionist. But in both cases, the strategies they employ inevitably fall short, because they lack a key ingredient that is crucial to providing optimum nutrition. That key ingredient is variety. Without it, the best any home-prepared recipe or packaged food can do is provide a single nutritionally balanced meal for the 'typical,' dog or cat – and as we know, it's the rare animal who can be considered 'typical,' with regard to body composition, metabolism, energy requirements and nutritional needs. Even more concerning is that for all of these animals, eating the same food every day poses an array of health risks, including the risk of nutritional imbalances for those whose nutrient requirements deviate to even a small degree from those of the 'typical,' animal.

Fortunately, there are ways to incorporate variety into the diet by making innovative modifications to commercial foods, or by implementing a less rigid approach to preparing meals at home. But first, let's be clear about why doing so is worth the effort.

Why Is Variety So Important?

It's a difficult truth to embrace, but even the best 'nutritionally complete,' commercial food or recipe in use today – one that is formulated based on the best nutritional science available and in adherence with AAFCO guidelines – is unlikely to be 100% nutritionally complete for any given animal. How is this possible?

Nutrition is an Evolving Science, And We Don't Know What We Don't Know.

Every week, it seems, a new study emerges revealing new information about how diet affects good health. How much protein is enough – and how much is too much? Are high-carbohydrate foods bad for dogs and cats, or are they an important source of valuable nutrients? Which micronutrients can their bodies manufacture and which ones must they get from food? What is the role of intestinal bacteria in immune response, cancer prevention and the aging process? What phytonutrients should we be feeding to help them live healthier, happier, longer lives – and in what amount?

Expert opinions vary on all these questions and many others. What we thought we knew a few years ago now looks less certain and in some cases has been proven fundamentally incorrect. And yet, AAFCO guidelines, which have become the gold standard for commercial food manufacturers and recipe developers, are based on this uncertain and ever-changing knowledge base.

It makes sense, of course, to make good use of the information we have available today. But it also makes sense to find ways to reach beyond the current information – and its limitations – to create a feeding strategy that protects against those gaps in our knowledge.

It May Be Nutritionally Complete, but for Whom?

If you were to survey caregivers with multiple dogs or cats in the home, chances they'd report that the animals don't all need the same amount of food, even if they're the same size. One may even do best on one brand of food or recipe while another needs something different.

That's because no two animals have the same nutritional requirements, even among animals of the same breed. Differences in metabolism, in the way they process foods and utilise certain nutrients and even genetic factors are among the many reasons the diet that's right for one, may not work well for another.

How is it possible, then, that adhering to a single set of nutritional guidelines, like those set by AAFCO, could ensure that every animal will get all the nutrients she needs, in the amount she needs them?

It isn't. In fact, the likelihood that any given dog or cat is getting the best possible nutrition – for that particular animal – from that packaged food is low. That's true of the type and proportion of macronutrients, like protein, carbohydrates and fats; it's also true of the thousands of micronutrients, including vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and other phytonutrients, many of which are yet to be well understood by even the most knowledgeable veterinary nutritionists.

The Needs of a Given Animal Change Across Time

It's well understood that a dog or cat's nutritional needs change as she ages. Many senior animals need to consume fewer calories to avoid gaining weight, due to changes in activity level and in the way their bodies process food. Often, older individuals' protein needs change. Some need more protein to stay healthy, while others may need to restrict protein levels to protect kidney function. For many, their ability to assimilate micronutrients becomes less efficient.

Regardless of age, an animal's nutritional needs change during times of stress; the body may require more calories than usual and certain key vitamins are more likely to become depleted.

It's clear that the dietary needs of any given animal change over time due to changes in health, environmental stress, activity level and age. How then, is it possible that a single packaged food can be 'nutritionally complete,' for every dog or cat, or even for most of them, when their nutritional needs are something of a moving target?

Feeding the Same Commercial Ingredients for Weeks or Months Poses Multiple Health Risks.

All the concerns we've raised thus far are made worse by the fact that caregivers are often told to find a high-quality food and feed that same food every day, for weeks, months and even years. Even with the recent trend toward feeding home-prepared meals, they're instructed to find a recipe created by a trained veterinary nutritionist and feed that every day. Imagine the consequences if that packaged food or that home-prepared recipe does not deliver one or more key nutrients in the amount an animal needs. As we've

seen, the likelihood of that is real. It's easy, then, to see how deficiencies or excesses can occur, some of which can lead to illness, premature aging, or even organ damage. And if the proportion of macronutrients is not optimal for a particular cat or dog, it could trigger an array of physical and even behavioural disturbances.

Eating a meal that meets most but not all of an animal's needs for a few days is unlikely to make him sick. But if he eats that same food for weeks and months, any deficiencies or imbalances will be compounded. That's when his health may be seriously impacted.

Additionally, exposing an animal to the same food day after day over an extended period of time elevates the risk he'll develop a food sensitivity or allergy. Too often we see caregivers chasing increasingly exotic animal proteins because their companions have become allergic to chicken or beef. And the widespread fear of feeding grains may in fact be due to animals developing sensitivities after months or years of eating a single commercial food made with corn or wheat or other grain that would be an excellent choice if fed in rotation with other carbohydrate-rich foods. In both scenarios, the problem could have been avoided by adding variety to the menu: simply feed a different array of ingredients from one day or one week to the next.

Feeding a Varied Diet Offers the Best Opportunity to Meet All Nutritional Needs

As we've seen, there is no single formula that is correct for every dog or cat, because each individual's needs are unique. When we feed a single packaged food or home-prepared recipe every day, there's a chance that a valuable nutrient is missing, or it's not available in the ideal amount. It also introduces an avoidable risk the animal will develop an allergy or sensitivity to an ingredient he sees every day – day after day. If instead we feed a varied diet, each animal has the opportunity to get the nutrients she needs, in whatever amount she needs them, from the wide array of ingredients he finds in his bowl over the course of a few days or weeks. In fact, each individual will have a better opportunity to meet her unique nutritional requirements when fed a highly varied diet than when fed a single commercial formula or recipe based on the best science available.

To understand why, let's shift our attention for a moment from dogs and cats to humans and the strategies you and I use to craft a healthy diet for ourselves.

Take a moment to think about the way you eat. It's my guess you're reasonably conscious about eating a healthy diet yourself. You aim to meet all your nutritional requirements and probably succeed at that fairly well. Chances are you're familiar with the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA) or the Population Reference Intake (PRI) established by authorities in the U.S. and Europe and might even use those to help inform your dietary choices. Does every one of your meals meet those RDA or PRI recommendations? Do you meet every one of them in any single day? Is there a recipe you rely on that's been designed to provide all the nutritional requirements identified by those guidelines? If you knew of such a recipe, would you eat that each and every day, for weeks or months or longer? Assuming you don't – or wouldn't – do you ever worry that you couldn't possibly be eating a healthy diet without following such narrow guidelines? Probably not.

Instead, I'm betting that your strategy for eating a healthy diet is based on eating fresh, whole foods, including lots of vegetables and fruits, with lots of variety. You don't worry about getting every nutrient in precisely the recommended amount



each day, let alone at every meal, because you're confident you can get everything you need by eating a highly varied diet of good, wholesome food. That's the power of a highly varied diet – it allows you to trust that your nutritional needs will be met, even though you're not calculating micronutrient levels at every meal.

And you'd be right. In fact, you're doing a much better job of getting everything you need that way than if you followed a single recipe based on the RDA or PRI and ate that every single day. For all the reasons we've discussed above, eating a single recipe every day would pose far greater health risks than your practice of putting something different on your plate every day.

Here's the thing. Our dogs and cats can do just as well eating the same way. When we feed them a varied diet based on excellent ingredients, they thrive just as you do. A feeding strategy based on that principle will meet their needs better than any single kibble or canned-food formula or home-prepared recipe.

How will we accomplish this?

An Innovative Marketing Strategy for Commercial Foods – That's Also a Step Toward Better Health

Feeding a varied diet is indeed antithetical to the current paradigm of creating kibble and canned foods. Many brands offer different flavors within a single line and those offer variability in a few named ingredients – typically the protein component. A customer can buy the chicken or duck formula today and switch to beef or lamb when it's time to restock. But most other ingredients remain the same, so the variation between flavors is minimal. What's more, a 40-pound bag of food likely lasts weeks or longer, so the opportunity to vary any ingredients doesn't come along often enough.

Manufacturers can take a key step toward healthier food by creating four or five or more entirely different formulas, each one containing unique ingredients – and then packaging them so that a customer buys a set of multiple formulas with each purchase. That 40-pound bag of kibble might contain five eight-pound packets, each one with ingredients that don't appear in any of the other four packets. A case of canned food might similarly contain cans made from five completely different formulas.

Such a variety-pack would be healthier for the animals – and it also presents a unique marketing opportunity. It's well known that caregivers often consider trends in human nutrition when looking for the best food for their canine and feline family members. Those who are savvy about creating a healthy diet for themselves are well aware of the benefits of eating a wide variety of foods – they strive to 'the colors of the rainbow.' No doubt they'd welcome an opportunity to purchase a food that would provide the same benefits to their dogs and cats.

The Most Nutritious Way to Feed a Home-prepared Diet – That's Also the Easiest

For caregivers feeding a home-prepared diet, one solution is to feed several different recipes rather than just one, making sure that each recipe is made from a unique array of ingredients.

A far better solution is one I have been recommending and teaching for more than 25 years with excellent results – an approach I call the Fresh & Flexible™ meal plan. It involves feeding companion animals based on the same principles we use to feed ourselves: fresh whole foods, including lots of fruits and vegetables and plenty of variety – something different in the bowl every day or every few days. The plan includes no recipes, only broad guidelines to help caregivers know what kinds of food to put in the bowl. Within each category of food, the caregiver is instructed to choose from the full range of available whole foods (with just a few cautionary exceptions), adjusting amounts of macronutrients according to the needs of each individual. A summary of that plan is outlined in Table 1.

Animals fed with this approach consistently demonstrate improvements in vitality, mobility, digestion, health of the skin and coat, energy levels, and more. I've even seen improvements in kidney function and a range of age-related issues. Adherence to the plan is high, because of the ease of implementation. With virtually unlimited options



for ingredients there's no need for caregivers to buy extra groceries or prepare separate meals for their companions – they can simply share healthy foods they're already preparing for human family members.

Why Does It Work So Well?

When we feed a highly varied diet, utilising different foods every day or every few days, the animal has the opportunity to draw whatever nutrients she needs, in whatever amount she needs them, from the wide array of ingredients she finds in her bowl over the course of a few days or weeks. Her meals may not meet AAFCO guidelines for every nutrient every day—but with a variety of foods to draw from, her unique nutritional requirements will be met over the course of several meals. In short, she'll get everything she needs

Higher-protein foods	30% to 60% of the meal (may be higher for cats)
Higher-carbohydrate foods	30% to 60% of the meal
Fruits and vegetables	10% to 30% of the meal
Nutrition boosters (nutrient-dense or other beneficial foods such as spirulina, nutritional yeast, wheat germ, mushrooms, fermented foods)	Amount is proportional to the weight of the animal, and varies depending on the booster
Fat	1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon
Calcium supplement (for meat-based diets)	1 heaping teaspoon of calcium carbonate per pound of meat
Multi-vitamin supplement	Follow label dosing guidelines, adjusted in proportion to the weight of the animal

*Adapted from The Fresh & Flexible™ Meal Plan: The Easiest, Most Nutritious Way to Feed Your Dog and Cat by Jan Allegretti, D. Vet. Hom. Copyright © 2018, 2025 by Jan Allegretti

Table 1: An Abbreviated Guide to the Fresh & Flexible™ Meal Plan*



by applying the same principles of good nutrition that you enjoy. She'll experience less risk of nutritional imbalance or of developing an allergy or intolerance than if she were eating the same foods every day.

The Next Step Toward Radiant Good Health

We've made great strides in our understanding of canine and feline nutrition in recent decades. Vast amounts of dollars are spent by commercial food manufacturers and caregivers in an effort to provide companion animals with the optimal diet. And yet, we miss an enormous opportunity to come closer to that goal when we dismiss this key component known to be crucial for human nutrition. If we embrace innovative ways to incorporate variety into the meals we create for our dogs and cats, with little or no added cost we can make a remarkable new contribution to their health and longevity.



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