MEAT IN PET FOODS

IS REALITY THE SAME AS PERCEPTION?

By Amy Budd

The meat that goes into your dog's food may not be what you think it is, even if you're buying raw. Find out about some meat processing techniques, and the terminology that's used to mislead us. And don't read this while you're eating dinner.

It's anticipated that this year alone, consumers will spend over over $58 billion on food, treats, collars and toys. But our pets aren't the only benficiaries of that spending. There's big money to made from pet owning consumers, especially for the manufacturers of the one item all pets can't live without: food.

Despite its size and implications on our companion animals' health, the pet food industry is poorly regulated for both manufacturing and ingredient sourcing. Currently, no plant inspections are required to manufacture pet foods and many of the ingredients on the label are not exactly what you think they are. In fact, when it comes to meat, what you imagine and what's actually in the food might not be the same.

When Is Meat Not Meat?

Pet foods can contain meat, meat meals, and meat by-product meals. Most consumers understand that meat is ideal, followed by meat meals, with by-product meal bringing up the rear (no pun intended) in terms of quality. What you may not know is that the meat listed on an ingredient label as "chicken" can be any of a range of qualities, and there is no distinction required on the label.

So, some television commercials and print ads will show fresh, whole chicken breasts in the food they're advertising. I can guarantee that is not the meat going into kibbled pet food. The same holds true for canned pet foods. Many raw food companies are also using a lesser quality meat than whole muscle meat.

Meat according to the AAFCO guidelines is: "the clean flesh derived from slaughtered mammals and is limited to that part of the striate muscle which is skeletal or that which is found in the tongue, in the diaphragm, in the heart, or in the esophagus; with or without the accompanying and overlying fat and the portions of the skin, sinew, nerve, and blood vessels which normally accompany the flesh. It shall be suitable for use in animal food." Nothing in that definition indicates how the "meat" is obtained and whether it is whole muscle meat (think steak or whole chicken breast), comminuted or mechanically separated meat (think hot dogs), or denatured meat (think charcoal colored substance).

So what is mechanically separated meat? And how is it separated? This is a process used both in human food production and pet food production. The left over carcass is ground down to a paste-like product, then put through a high pressure sieve to extract the meat from the bones. Any bone particles should be caught by the sieve. With this process there are tendons, veins, and arteries that are ground up as well. The mechanically separated meat is a very nutrient dense product.

When the meat is mechanically separated, it loses the color as well as the flavor and in order to give MCDM [mechanically deboned chicken meat] the flavor and a hue, artificial colors and flavors are added; and to make it bacteria free, the meat is treated with ammonium hydroxide."

The end result is the pink slime you may be reading about.

Meat meals and meat by-product meals are used in processed diets such as kibble and canned foods, but not raw diets. These pictures of a "waste barrel" I personally took are out of a USDA human food facility. The barrel was being picked up by a local pet food processing facility that contracts with several plants to utilize their "waste products."

In the picture below you can see pieces of plastic I have circled. I was too grossed out to move things around to get a better picture of how big the piece of plastic was. The plant manager went so far as to tell me his employees think nothing of throwing a wad of chew in those barrels when they come back from lunch. It doesn't matter how high the temperature is when the product is rendered (cooked)—there is still too much garbage!

Making Meat Appealing

For consumers both two legged and four legged, some of the problems come with what is legally allowed to be added back into this product to make it "more appealing." I don't know about you, but to me the idea of eating meat paste lost its appeal quite some time ago!

Legally, both human and pet food manufacturers can add colors back in, so the meat is fresh and pink instead of the gray color it has after the mechanical separation process. Thepoultryguide.com explains: "When the meat is mechanically separated, it loses the color as well as the flavor and in order to give MCDM [mechanically deboned chicken meat] the flavor and a hue, artificial colors and flavors are added; and to make it bacteria free, the meat is treated with ammonium hydroxide."

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Denatured Meat

There is a lot of confusion right now with the term "denatured meat" due to the use of High Pressure Pasteurization (HPP) or cooking. Both of these processes will denature the protein, but this is completely different from the chemical denaturing I'm referring to here.

There are several ways to create a denatured product. From a meat producer's standpoint, denaturing is the process of using either a color or chemical agent to mark meat or meat products so they are identified as "Inedible: Not Intended for Human Food."

The USDA allows the meat to be identified with a distinct color, odor or taste so it cannot ever be mistaken for human food: "Unless it is identified as required by regulations to deter its use as human food (9 CFR 325.11(e)(1)-(5) and 381.193), no carcass, or part or product of a carcass, capable of use as human food that is adulterated or misbranded can be offered for transportation in commerce unless it is denatured."

The following "identifying agents" are allowed by the USDA for use as denaturing agents (and none of them sound like things we want our dogs to eat):

Crude carbolic acid;

Cresylic disinfectant;

FD&C green No. 3 coloring;

FD&C blue No. 1 coloring;

FD&C blue No. 2 coloring;

Finely powdered charcoal or black dyes;

Any phenolic disinfectant conforming to commercial standards CS 70-41 or CS 71-41 which shall be used in at least two percent emulsion or solution.

A formula consisting of 1 part FD&C green No. 3 coloring, 40 parts water, 40 parts liquid detergent, and 40 parts oil of citronella;

A 6 percent solution of tannic acid for 1 minute followed by immersion in a water bath, then immersing it for 1 minute in a solution of 0.022 percent FD&C yellow No. 5 coloring;

A solution of 0.0625 percent tannic acid, followed by immersion in a water bath, then dipping it in a solution of 0.0625 percent ferric acid;

No. 2 fuel oil, brucine dissolved in a mixture of alcohol and pine oil or oil of rosemary, finely powdered charcoal;

A 4 percent by weight of coarsely ground hard bone; or

A 6 percent by weight of coarsely ground hard bone; or

'other proprietary substance' approved by the USDA

What's Not On The Label

And, just as with mechanically separated meat, artificial color can legally be added back to denatured meat to bring the color back to normal meat color.

Pet food companies are not required to list anywhere on the label that they're using mechanically separated or denatured meat. USDA facilities that produce meat for human consumption are required to denature any meat product that is destined for pet food processing, so there is no possibility a person would eat it. I once tried to purchase meat from a large USDA facility for my raw food and the on-site inspector wouldn't let it out of the plant without a chemical denaturing once he knew it was for pet food. Needless to say, I did not and could not go through with the transaction. Now I am always wary of other companies' practices, knowing what I have been up against to find clean meat.

There are a few exceptions to this rule, one concerning the type of facility the pet food is processed in. If the pet food is processed in a USDA plant using shared equipment, the plant must use human edible products (USDA inspected meats); if using uninspected products, the pet food must be processed using separate equipment and can be denatured meat. In the latter case, many pet food manufacturers use the term "from USDA inspected facilities." It's important to note the distinction between USDA inspected meats and USDA inspected facilities!

Labels Can Be Purposefully Deceptive

Good quality meat is not cheap for humans or for pets. But pet industry advertising and labels can confuse even the most knowledgeable consumers. One of my pet peeves (pun intended!) are the made-up terms used by the pet industry. There's no such thing as "human grade ingredients," for instance; that was a term coined by the industry to make consumers feel better about the products they are purchasing, with one exception to my knowledge: I am aware of one company that has gone through the painstaking two year process to be able to use that distinction on their packaging. The correct term for a high quality human product would be "human edible."

There is also no such thing as "hormone free" or "antibiotic free" meat. All meat is weaned off hormones when it goes for processing; that's a requirement of the USDA. The correct term for an animal that has never been introduced to hormones or antibiotics is "No added hormones or antibiotics." Once again, it's a very subtle difference consumers should be aware of!

I've been inside many different processing plants that process all different types of products including countless human meat processing facilities, a local rendering plant and a huge plant that does all the mechanical separation of meats for many of the large kibble manufacturers. As a consumer, you expect to be able to trust what you read, trust the manufacturer to do their job, and trust your retailer to know the companies and their manufacturing practices. The ugly truth is that many of the manufacturers today are only concerned with their bottom lines and profit margins, and the pet population is paying the price.

It's a difficult task to sort out all the information that is purposely designed to confuse the consumer. We have more choices than ever and there are some incredible companies doing great things to make a positive difference—you just have to work a little harder to find them. I encourage you to ask questions, lots of questions! If there is nothing to hide, the questions are easy to answer and you want to know you're getting what you paid for.

Acknowledgement

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