



MISGUIDED DIET DOGMA

Why your veterinarian may not be qualified to advise you what to feed your dog

By Doug Knueven DVM CVA CVC CVCH

Hills, Purina, and Iams are ingrained into the consciousness of every veterinarian from their professional infancy to their grave. Processed food is in our blood. How can you expect a veterinarian to be open to the idea that real, raw food is anything but dangerous for pets?

Veterinary college programs do include nutrition training, which would seem to be a great thing. The basis of wellbeing is a healthy diet. We cannot expect our pets to build strong bodies and powerful immune systems without the needed raw materials. Additionally, we now know that nutrients turn genes on and off and often

control the genesis and progression of disease. Unfortunately, nutrition education in veterinary schools is heavily influenced by pet food manufacturers. This gives veterinarians a skewed view of nutrition and propagates misguided, conventional diet dogma.

Industry Influence

The standard textbook from which veterinary students learn about dog and cat nutrition is published by a major pet food company. The nutritionist that teaches them has usually had his education underwritten by a major pet food company. These pet food companies provide free pet food for vet students and also

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to the teaching hospitals where they are learning about veterinary norms. Who has money to fund research into pet nutrition? You guessed it: the major pet food companies. Furthermore, most continuing education for veterinarians on nutrition is sponsored by pet food companies. These corporations also have an obvious presence in the exhibit halls of all major veterinary conferences. This is how the standard view of nutrition becomes dogma.

The Conventional View Of Nutrition

Conventional veterinary nutrition is based on modern day research - which sounds well and good except for the fact that the vast majority of the research is sponsored by pet food companies. Many studies have shown that industry-sponsored research often results in biased findings. Let's face it: if every pet food company can show research indicating that their food is the best, then there must be something wrong with at least some of the research.

The modern approach to veterinary nutrition embraces the arrogant assumption that we know enough about nutrition to formulate a balanced diet using ingredients that the species has never been exposed to in millions of years of evolution. You will commonly hear those in the conventional pet food industry say, "It's the nutrients, not the ingredients, that are important." The problem with this view is that diets formulated with an incomplete understanding of the required nutrients are themselves incomplete. Mother Nature is smarter than the smartest veterinary nutritionist.

One corollary to the simplistic notion that pet food ingredients are irrelevant is that

all calories are equal. In other words, it does not matter whether a dog gets his calories from proteins, fats, or carbohydrates. All that matters is the number of calories he eats. This is a misguided idea for many reasons.

First of all, most studies indicate that calories from fat and protein are better at satisfying hunger than those from carbs. A pet on a high protein diet is less hungry and will eat less food. Thus, he is more likely to maintain a healthy body weight. Secondly, we need to consider the epigenetic effects of foods. Certain nutrients turn on or off particular genes. For example, carbs turn on genes that increase the production and release of insulin and insulin-like growth factor (IGF). Both of these are known to directly stimulate cancer cell growth and cancer's ability to invade neighboring tissue.

A final problem with the idea that all calories are equal is the thermogenic effect of food. This is a measure of the amount of energy it takes to digest a particular food. For instance, protein and carbs are equally calorie dense - they both provide four calories per gram. But it takes on average two to three times more calories to digest protein than it does the same amount of carbs. So the net gain in calories from protein is less than that from carbs. The bottom line is that different food ingredients have different effects on the body, and pets benefit from diets low in carbs.

And yet, when I directly asked a nutritionist from a major pet food company what the ideal level of carbohydrate is for pet food, he told me that dog food should consist of forty to fifty percent carbohydrate and cat food should contain thirty to forty percent carbohydrate on a dry matter



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basis. This is a much higher level of carbohydrate than our carnivorous companions were designed to handle.

My Personal Experience With Veterinary Nutritionists

I have spoken with many veterinary nutritionists over the years. In 2010, I spent two days with a nutritionist as part of an intensive, one-on-one veterinary nutrition course at a US veterinary college. She indicated to me that nutrition plays a very small role in the management of sick pets compared to that of other veterinary treatments such as drugs and surgery. She seemed totally unaware of the role of poor nutrition in the development of many chronic diseases. And yet she bemoaned the fact that her students did not place much importance in what she was teaching. Why would they waste their time on an intervention that apparently had such a small effect on pet health?

Her function at the veterinary school, besides teaching, was mostly formulating weight loss diets for obese animals and special diets for pets with food allergies, as well as diagnosing and treating the rare case of nutritional excess or deficiency. When I asked her what she thought about the fact that AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) food trials last only six months and can include as few as six animals, she had to look up the protocol to verify these facts.

One of her mottos regarding pet food ingredients was "All things in moderation." All I could think was, "Really? All things? How about a little cocaine? Only in moderation, of course." There are some ingredients, such as grains, that do not belong in pet food in any amount. When nutrition experts hold views like this, it's no wonder that many veterinarians have a strange view of what constitutes a healthy pet diet.

I have since spent a couple of days with a veterinary nutritionist at another vet school. She truly understood the value of

real food for pets and was an outspoken opponent of processed foods. Unfortunately, she has recently retired and the last I heard, Hills was taking over the vet school's nutrition courses. A great way for the vet school to save some money, don't you think?

The Last Thing On Our Minds


Out in practice, most veterinarians do not give much thought to a pet's diet. We've been trained that the pet food companies know what they're doing, so why question it. Nutrition is complicated, with all those nutrients needing to be precisely balanced. The pet food companies have the experts to perfectly formulate diets. Besides, we are so busy keeping up with new drugs and surgical procedures that there just isn't much time for the trivialities of nutrition.

Most vets who do think of diet are going to go with what they know - processed foods. And the pet food companies have a scientifically prepared diet for just about every disease. Never mind that the ingredients are totally foreign to the animals consuming them: industry sponsored studies show these foods are best.

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Is There Hope?

My hope is that the grassroots raw pet food movement will cause more vets to see the light as they encounter healthy animals being fed these diets. Perhaps the conventional nutrition programming can be unlearned and the diet dogma can be overcome.

It is the persistence of raw food proponents that will open the eyes of veterinarians to the truth. 



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