

Do You Know What's In Your Pet's Food?

They say "you are what you eat," and what you put or don't put into your body can have an effect on your overall health and well being. The same can be said for your pets.

Unfortunately, most pet owners don't know that the majority of commercial pet foods contain ingredients that are a far cry from being healthy and nutritious for their companion animals. And reading pet food labels doesn't help much either. In this country, there is no uniform regulation of the pet food industry, and the enforcement of what rules do exist is pretty lax. That being the case, pet food manufacturers may or may not list every single ingredient their foods contain.

According to organicpetproducts.com, an online retailer that provides high-quality organic products for pets, the list of ingredients on that bag of dry pet food or can of "meat" can "mask the real toxic horrors behind innocuous-sounding phrases such as 'meat meal,' 'bone meal,' and 'meat by-products,'" the most common ingredients found in pet food. The retailer further states that it's the substances you don't know about in that pet food that "may sicken or even kill your pet."

Beware of ingredients

So exactly what are most commercial pet foods made of? According to the Animal Protection Institute (API), a national nonprofit animal advocacy organization, here is a listing of some common ingredients found in most commercial pet foods.

1. Meat and poultry by-products. These are the unrendered parts of the animal left over after slaughter: bones, blood, intestines, lungs, ligaments, and almost all the other parts not generally consumed by humans. These "other parts" are known as "by-products," "meat-and-bone-meal," or similar names on pet food labels. The term "meal" means that these materials are not used fresh, but have been rendered, or processed for industrial use.

According to organicpetproducts.com, some other things that may go into rendering include: spoiled meat from the supermarket (most of it still wrapped in plastic); roadkill that can't be buried on the roadside; the "4-D's" of ranch animals: dead, dying, diseased and disabled; rancid restaurant grease (listed as "Animal Fat" on labels); and euthanized companion animals.

2. Animal and poultry fat. The pungent odor you smell when you open a new bag of pet food is most often from rendered animal fat, restaurant grease, or other oils too rancid or deemed inedible for humans. These fats are sprayed directly onto extruded kibbles and pellets to make an otherwise bland or distasteful product palatable. The fat also acts as a binding agent to which manufacturers add other flavor enhancers.

3. Wheat, soy, corn, peanut hulls, and other vegetable protein. The amount of grain products used in pet food has risen over the last decade. Once considered filler by the pet food industry, cereal and grain products now replace a considerable proportion of the meat that was used in the first commercial pet foods.

4. Additives and preservatives. Chemicals are added to improve the taste, stability, characteristics, or appearance of the food. Additives provide no nutritional value and include emulsifiers to prevent water and fat from separating, antioxidants to prevent fat from turning rancid and artificial colors and flavors to make the product more attractive to consumers and more palatable to their companion animals. Look for, and avoid, BHA (a chemical preservative), BHT (a chemical preservative), and Ethoxyquin. (The U. S. Dept. of Agriculture for toxicology information lists Ethoxyquin in their Farm Chemical Handbook as a pesticide).

The long-term effects

What can the long-term feeding of such products do to our companion animals? Some veterinarians claim that feeding slaughterhouse wastes to animals increases their risk of getting cancer and other degenerative diseases. It is estimated that up to two million companion animals suffer from food allergies, and many veterinarians believe that commercial pet foods are a primary cause and can contribute to a host of health problems, according to organicpetfoods.com. Studies have shown that processed foods are a factor in an increasing number of pets suffering from cancer, arthritis, obesity, dental disease and heart diseases. Dull or unhealthy coats are also a common problem with cats and dogs, and a poor diet is usually the cause, say many veterinarians and breeders.

Do high-quality Pet foods exist?

There are many pet-food manufacturers out there that produce high-quality pet foods using the freshest and best ingredients possible. It just might take some extra leg-work to find them. Since most of these manufacturers are small companies with little or no advertising budgets, they are not well known and are not usually carried by major supermarket chains or pet product retailers. Their foods will ultimately cost more than commercial pet foods because you are paying for the freshest high-quality ingredients, and they will most likely be carried by distributors and specialty pet product retailers. A few brands to look for include: California Natural, Innova, Evo, Taste Of The Wild, Karma, Natural Balance, Newman's Own Organics, Chicken Soup, Wellness, and Canidae.