

manufacturer decides to use 3 piles of different grains at 5 lbs each instead of one big pile of one kind of rice. Now we have 5 lbs each of meat meal, white rice, brown rice and brewers rice. That still doesn't quite move the meat to the top, what should we do now? Well, we just add a little extra water to the meat meal to make it heavier! Now we have 7 lbs of meat and 5 lbs each of three different types of rice. Perfect, we can list the meat first and then the rice. See how easy it is to fudge the label?

5) Meat is good, "fillers" are bad

To a certain extent this is true. Good quality meat protein is important. However, too much protein is as bad as too little. Protein is needed to build tissue and to make most of the chemicals and cells in our bodies, from red blood cells to enzymes to hormones. But any extra protein is just going to be burned as fuel. Feeding a diet too high in protein is like burning furniture to heat your house. Fats and carbohydrates provide energy more efficiently and with fewer waste products that need to be handled by the liver and kidneys. Many grocery store canned pet foods are very high in protein, and it is often poor quality protein, meaning it's not very digestible. This means lots of extra work for the liver and kidneys to get rid of all the ammonia that is produced when these ingredients are broken down and digested. In an older pet with failing kidneys this may shorten life expectancy by several years (yes, years). The quality and digestibility of the protein is at least as important as the amount, and you can't tell this from reading the pet food label.

6) Vegetables in the dog food make it better (FALSE!)

Again, this is such a difficult thing to analyze from reading a label. How much is really in there? Eating a carrot and taking a baby aspirin every day are good for you. But eating a tenth of a carrot or taking a tenth of an aspirin probably won't do very much. Without being able to tell how many potatoes, carrots or what have you are in a bag, a can or a cup of pet food it's pretty difficult to judge the quality. With no government oversight we don't even have any assurance that the ingredients listed on the bag are the ones going into the food, much less whether there's 1 carrot per ton or 100. Take this popular concept with a grain of salt.

7) A pet food is better because it contains (choose one or all) glucosamine/prebiotics/probiotics/chicory/digestive enzymes/fish oil/etc.

It's the same with pricey ingredients like fish oil, probiotics or flax seed as it is with the vegetables. How much is really in there and is there enough to have a beneficial effect? Most of the time it's not, so you are paying a lot for benefits your pet isn't actually getting. For some of these ingredients there is very little evidence that they work in the first place and even less for how much is a therapeutic amount or whether the ingredient is safe. For a medication to be approved, the drug manufacturer has to prove both efficacy and safety. For nutritional additives no proof whatsoever is required. We would generally recommend a pet food to have a shorter, more simple ingredient list than to contain 20 unproven extra additives and 6 or 8 different grains and vegetables.

Those simple ingredients need to be high quality ones though. Less expensive pet foods, especially low-cost grocery store brands, may have a shorter ingredient list but the poor quality of those ingredients makes that brand a poor choice anyway. You want a high quality food but paying more for a list of fancy added extras with dubious benefits isn't always better.

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