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Get past the myths in reading pet food labels

I had a very eye-opening experience last month after I visited Hill's pet food corporate headquarters in Topeka, Kan.

The pet food business is a continually growing market, and I cannot keep up with all the new brands. Foods are sold through grocery outlets, mass retailers, specialty pet stores, and veterinary hospitals. You will not find two veterinarians who have the same opinion about foods, but at least we have been trained in nutrition and physiology.

When I go down the aisles in pet stores, I am attracted to the packaging

and claims made on foods – just as a regular consumer would be. The problem is that many of the claims made on labels and by non-veterinary professionals are misleading and under-supported by science.

Most of the small, niche pet food manufacturers do not have their food continually analyzed for nutrient content. They have variable monitoring of ingredients, and this is one of the reasons there have been numerous recalls.

One popular “premium” niche cat food had 22 erroneous nutrient claims when nine different packages of the food were analyzed. That is pretty scary. There are now only two pet food companies that actually perform feeding trials to guarantee their products.

Feeding trials are very expensive, so if companies don't have to do them, they

don't. Most pet food companies only state that their food has been formulated to meet standards set by the Association of American Feed Control Officials. The real gold standard is performing a feeding trial using AAFCO protocols to document how the animal performs when fed a specific food.

Is a holistic food good? There is no legal definition for this term under laws devoted to pet foods. Any manufacturer can make claims of “holistic” in literature and brochures regardless of the ingredients they use.

Are human-grade foods good? “Human grade” means nothing as a legal term in pet foods, so “human grade” doesn't mean a thing. There is a legal term called “human edible” but you won't see this on any labels.

What about “natural” pet foods? According to AAFCO, this term requires a pet food to consist of only natural ingredients without chemical alterations. A big problem with “natural” foods is that they cannot include ingredients such as Vitamin E and minerals, which require synthesis to be active nutrients.

Finally, what are organic pet foods? To use the term “organic,” pet foods must follow USDA rules, contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients and have a special seal on the packaging. Most pet foods actually state that they are made with organic ingredients and are not eligible for the USDA seal because they contain less than the required organic content.

Some people read labels to see what order ingredients such as chicken are listed, because the listing

ranking shows the relative amount of the ingredient. Don't be fooled. Even if chicken is the first listed ingredient it doesn't differentiate between high- and low-grade chicken. The best way to determine the quality of the chicken is to also assess the calcium and phosphorus levels in the food. The higher these minerals, the more likely the chicken used is mostly ground chicken bones and thus is a lower quality.

There are also other terms some pet food manufacturers use to scare you about other foods such as they contain “byproducts.” Did you know that byproducts such as organ meat, beet pulp and chicken fat are great sources of nutrition?

Another popular myth about pet foods is that they should be grain-free. While there are a few animals that

may be allergic to grains, when you look at food allergy data in pets, corn is one of the least allergenic products used in pet food. When manufacturers don't use corn, they use other sources of carbohydrate, which may sound great – such as sweet potatoes and barley – but in reality, corn contains many fabulous nutrients such as Beta-carotene, Vitamin E and lutein.

Ultimately, consumers should be informed when it comes to pet foods and look past the pretty packaging and marketing buzz words. Read the labels, talk to your veterinarian, and ask manufacturers for the scientific results or feeding trials to back their claims. You might be in for a big surprise.

Dr. Elaine Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange, 714-282-2287.



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