

# Common Myths About Pet Food and Nutrition

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Here are some of the myths heard most often to help you separate fact from fiction:

1. The best foods are those that the veterinarian sells like Royal Canin, Purina Veterinary and Hill's Science Diet.
2. Dry food cleans a dog's or cat's teeth.
3. Pets do better eating food designed for their life stage (i.e. puppy/kitten and senior formulas.)
4. Table scraps and other "people food" are bad for dogs and cats.
5. Only complete and balanced meals should be fed to dogs and cats.
6. Feeding raw food is dangerous due to the risk of Salmonella and E. Coli.
7. Dogs and cats should not eat grains.
8. Ash content is an important guideline in choosing a cat food.
9. Changing formulas or brands of pet food is hard on a dog or cat's digestion.
10. Its fine for dogs and cats to eat each other's food.

## **1. The best foods are those the veterinarian sells such as Royal Canin, Purina Veterinary and Science Diet.**

While many pet guardians have been under the impression that these brands and others sold by their veterinarian are premium, top of the line foods, one look at the ingredients by an educated eye will reveal the truth. Most of the formulas from these large, heavily marketed manufacturers derive far more protein from grain or grain by-product sources such as corn gluten meal and brewer's rice than from meat sources.

These so-called "premium" foods contain ingredients such as chicken by-product meal, which consists of the leftovers in meat processing that are unfit for human consumption including head, necks, feet, undeveloped eggs, and intestines – basically everything BUT clean meat. It is a cheap, low quality source of protein – and far less digestible protein than clean chicken meal. These ingredients indicate poor quality food, and are the same ingredients you'll find in the discount brands at your grocery store!

Meat, and specifically a named meat meal (i.e., chicken meal, lamb meal, etc.) should be listed before any grains in a pet food. Dogs and cats are designed by nature to eat protein from meat sources, not grain. The high grain content of many pet foods is one of the main contributors to the growing obesity problem and increase in allergies in dogs and cats, as most pets do not do well on such high-carbohydrate foods. (This does not mean that all grains are bad for dogs and cats – see myth #7)

For more information on selecting a truly premium food for your companion, see our articles, "[Quick Guide to Natural Pet Foods](#)," and "[What You Need to Know About Your Pet's Food](#)."

## **2. Dry food cleans a dog's or cat's teeth.**

This one you might even hear from some veterinarians, but it is most definitely not true. Actually, if you wanted to stretch things a bit, kibble might clean the very tips of your pet's teeth, but that's about it. Dogs and cats have very pointed teeth; even their molars are sharp edged, not flat. These are teeth that were designed to bite, tear and chew raw meat. When a dog or cat eats kibble they either swallow it whole or, when they manage to bite down on a kibble or two, it will shatter. Kibble does not scrape down onto the lower parts of the teeth or near the gums, which is where dental problems start. In fact, kibble can contribute to dental problems when small bits lodge between the teeth and promote bacterial growth. Just as with humans, food debris that contains carbohydrates gets broken down into sugar, which dental bacteria feed upon.

Dental care for dogs and cats is vitally important as poor dental health can lead to other chronic disease conditions. Healthy teeth start with a healthy diet of course, and with regular brushing. Please see our article, "[Dental Healthcare for Your Companion](#)," for detailed information on caring for your four-legged friend's teeth.

[Raw meat and bones](#) are a terrific way to promote healthy teeth and gums as they require the dog or cat to gnaw and chew in a way that the sinews of the meat and hard bone will scrape teeth and massage gums. The longer they gnaw and chew the cleaner the teeth become, so big chunks of meat or meaty bones like chicken or turkey necks are ideal. The size of the meat or meaty bone should be appropriate for the size of the animal. For example cats can chew [chicken necks](#), but not [turkey necks](#). If raw meat and bones are a bit more than you bargained for in caring for Fido's or Max's teeth, then brushing is a must. In addition to [regular brushing](#), [dental and oral supplements](#) such as PetzLife Oral Care Gel or Spray, Proden PlaqueOff or Wysong Dentatreat can assist in discouraging the bacteria that cause plaque buildup on teeth. Jaw exercise and gum massage are important components of dental care, so try [Complete Natural Nutrition Terrabones](#) or [Zukes Z-Bones](#) for a healthy, non-raw chew for dogs. Some cats like to chew, too. Catnip-filled toys such as the [Catnip Chew Ring](#) or the [Yeowww! Catnip Tin of Stinkies Cat Toys](#) are enticing to many kitties.

### **3. Dogs and cats should be fed a food appropriate to their life stage - puppies need puppy food, kittens need kitten food and senior pets need senior diets.**

Stage of life diets were really created as a marketing tool. The more formulas of food a particular manufacturer could develop, the more shelf space they could command. While it is true that puppies and kittens need more food for their size than adult animals, they do not necessarily need a specially formulated puppy or kitten food. A high-quality, varied diet is the best option for most young pets. For puppies this can include [dry food](#), [canned](#), [freeze-dried](#), [dehydrated](#), and [raw](#) food. For kittens, kibble is not recommended to be a large portion of the diet (nor for adult cats) as it can contribute to dehydration, urinary tract issues and less than optimal health over time. Cats are obligate carnivores, which means they are designed by nature to eat meat and very little carbohydrates. The newer higher meat content [grain-free foods](#) may be a good option if kibble is to be fed to kittens, but [canned](#), [freeze-dried](#), [dehydrated](#) and [raw](#) are better choices. Puppies, especially large breeds, can be at risk of growing too fast and experiencing joint problems - so overfeeding a high-protein food can be detrimental.

Some holistic manufacturers do have [puppy,kitten](#) and/or senior formulas, but these are created with the same care and attention to detail that goes into their regular formulas, and often include holistic ingredients like probiotics and enzymes that are helpful for pets at various life stages. In particular, holistic pet foods for [senior cats](#) and for [senior dogs](#) may contain more natural digestible fiber and/or herbs that promote healthy aging, unlike many conventional senior formulas that often reduce protein, boost the cheap carbohydrates, and add cheap indigestible fiber to their "special" senior line. Feeding younger animals more frequent meals - 3 times per day, is helpful while they are in their biggest growth phase. After three or four months of age, two meals per day should be sufficient for most animals. Puppies and kittens should be kept slim, just like adult animals. The pictures shown in many puppy or kitten food advertisements of round, roly-poly fur-balls are misleading. It is just as unhealthy for younger animals to be overweight as it is for adults. If you choose to feed a puppy or kitten food for the first few months, keep an eye on your little companion's waistline and don't let them get round. Transition to adult foods by three to six months of age.

Senior animals tend to slow down as they age, just as we humans do. While their calorie requirements may shrink, their need for the healthiest food you can provide is never greater than in the senior years. As animals age they require excellent nutrition to keep their immune system as strong as possible and their joints in good working order. Continue to feed a high quality, varied diet right into your companions final years, just feed a little less of it. Again, watch their waistline. Older dogs and cats are the most susceptible to the many health issues that obesity can contribute to including diabetes, arthritis, urinary tract problems and a shortened life span.

#### **4. Table scraps and other "people food" are bad for dogs and cats.**

This is another one you may have heard in the past from your veterinarian. Most holistically trained veterinarians, however, encourage the practice of feeding "people food" to pets. Healthy leftovers are an excellent supplement to your companion's regular fare. There are only two rules with people food for pets: 1) It must be healthy for them - meat, steamed or finely chopped veggies and fruits, baked sweet potato, rice, oatmeal; you get the picture - no junk food; and 2) If you give them some of what you are eating, remember to feed less of their own food so that they do not put on extra pounds. And skip the onions, grapes and raisins - those can be toxic to dogs and cats.

Even beyond leftovers, home-cooking is becoming popular among dog and cat lovers. Homemade food has never been easier to create. There are a number of [pre-mixes](#) available to which all you need to add is meat and an appropriate oil for healthy fat content. The pre-mix contains vegetables, vitamins and minerals, and sometimes grains to make the meal complete. [Sojos](#) has varieties with and without grains as well as an organic blend. Honest Kitchen offers [Honest Kitchen Preference](#), a grain-free blend. [Dr. Harvey's](#) makes pre-mixes for home cooked food that contains organic grains with an amazing blend of herbs, and also a grain-free pre-mix. You don't have to cook every meal for your companion to benefit from fresher food - even the occasional homemade dinner is a wonderful healthy treat!

#### **5. Only complete and balanced meals should be fed to cats and dogs.**

Pet food companies have a pretty big interest in perpetuating this myth. Is every meal you eat complete and balanced? How about every meal you feed your kids? Even the most health-conscious among us do not worry about meeting the proper balance of nutrients at every meal. We know that over the course of the day or week our diet will be fairly complete, so we don't worry about eating exactly what the food pyramid recommends on a daily basis. Many of us take vitamins and supplements to fill in any gaps because even eating a very healthy diet of whole foods may not provide all the vitamins and minerals our body needs to stay healthy in this day and age.

Variety is the key to a healthy diet for humans, for dogs and for cats. If you are feeding at least 50-60% commercially prepared foods that are designed to be "complete," then you are well on your way to providing a majority of the "balance" of nutrients. Adding [canned meats](#), raw or cooked meats, people food, fresh vegetables or other "incomplete" foods to your companion's meals can boost the overall nutrition of the diet as long as it is not overdone. Providing a [daily multi-vitamin](#) adds extra insurance. One caveat here - meat is higher in phosphorus and lower in calcium. When adding more than 15 - 20% extra meat to your companion's diet on a regular basis, keep the calcium and phosphorus ratio balanced over time by including raw bones or adding a [calcium supplement](#). Wysong Call of the Wild is a supplement designed to balance raw, cooked or canned meats and can make a varied diet simple.

#### **6. Feeding raw food is dangerous due to the risk of Salmonella and E. Coli.**

The digestive tracts of dogs and cats are very different than those of humans. The human digestive tract is approximately 25 to 28 feet long with a stomach acidity between 1.5 and 2.5. Dogs and cats have a much shorter digestive system at an average of 10 to 13 feet for dogs (shorter for cats) with an acidity of less than 1. Raw food moves through the dog or cat's system in less than half the time it would through a human's system, and the high acidity kills most bacteria such as salmonella. Even if the food was contaminated, it is likely that the microbes would not enter the animal's bloodstream. Commercially prepared raw food manufacturers take measures to control against the presence of unwanted organisms such as salmonella and e. coli, so if you're concerned about contamination, [frozen raw diets](#) are a good option.

If you eat meat, then you are aware of the precautions to take when handling raw meat. The same precautions apply to raw pet food as to raw meat destined to be cooked for human consumption: wash bowls, utensils and your hands after feeding and handling the meat. Keep the meat frozen until two to four days before feeding, and thaw in the refrigerator. Don't leave the food down for your pet

for more than 30-40 minutes, and throw any leftovers away after this time. If you use common sense, feeding raw food is no more difficult or dangerous to feed than any other pet food, and the health benefits of a raw diet can be amazing.

For more information see "[All About Raw Food](#)" in our article archives.

## **7. Dogs and cats should not eat grains.**

This particular "myth" can be true for some animals - especially cats. Again we must look at the teeth and digestive tract for clues here. Humans and herbivores have flat molars that can move back and forth to grind grasses and grains into fine particles. We produce the enzyme amylase in our saliva which begins to break down carbohydrates - even before they reach the stomach where the job is finished. Dogs and cats do not produce amylase in their saliva. Their teeth have sharp edges and do not move from side to side - they cannot "grind" anything in their mouths.

Dogs are considered omnivores of sorts - they can eat and digest grains and vegetables IF they have been somewhat pre-digested as they would be in an herbivore's stomach or intestines. Therefore cooked grains are an acceptable source of carbohydrates for most dogs - note that they are an acceptable carbohydrate source, NOT an acceptable source of protein. Cats on the other hand are obligate carnivores. They do not digest grains well and become far more easily dehydrated eating dry foods high in carbohydrates. Cats in the wild tend to derive all their moisture from their prey - they rarely drink water. Many holistic veterinarians believe the growing prevalence of obesity and diabetes and many other chronic diseases can be at least partially blamed on diets too high in carbohydrates for cats.

Grains should be whole or whole ground grains such as rice, oats, barley, millet, etc. Wheat and corn are common allergens, so they are typically avoided in the top quality natural pet foods. Wheat and corn are also less digestible for dogs. Grain by-products such as corn gluten meal, brewers rice, cereal fines and others are less expensive and less nutritious options than whole grains. Any time a food with grains is fed to a dog or cat, [digestive enzymes](#) should be added to the food. This helps improve digestion and your pet's absorption of the nutrients in the food. Digestive enzymes are one of the two most important supplements you can provide for your companion, along with [essential fatty acids](#) (especially [fish oil](#)).

For more information please see our article, "[Is Grain Free Food Right for Your Companion.](#)"

## **8. Ash Content is an important guideline in choosing a cat food.**

Concern about ash content in pet foods came about as veterinarians and cat guardians were looking for the cause of Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD - formerly known as FUS). In the 70's & 80's veterinarians thought ash was a factor in causing crystals in the urine. There are, however, a variety of causes and ash is no longer considered a factor in causing FLUTD. Further research has shown that the main problem was the formulation of commercial pet foods: most pet foods were creating a more alkaline urine (higher pH) which lead to an increase in struvite crystals. Most dry kibble diets are formulated with a high vegetable and grain content which creates a more alkaline urine. An all meat diet such as a cat would eat in nature creates a more acidic urine.

A high protein diet is the best way to maintain a low urinary pH naturally. Cats eating [canned diets](#) have fewer problems with FLUTD than those eating primarily dry kibble diets. This could be due both to the higher meat content of canned diets as well as the higher moisture content. Increased hydration also prevents crystal formation. A [raw food diet](#) is ideal for maintaining a lower urinary pH and providing proper hydration. Focusing on low-ash foods will not solve FLUTD problems, but a healthier diet and proper hydration will.

A more effective means of preventing FLUTD than stressing about the amount of ash in your companion's food is focusing on stress *reduction*. Stress is an often overlooked contributing factor to FLUTD. Lack of exercise is another. When your companion is stressed their immune system is compromised. Furthermore, when you are stressed, your companion is far more likely to be stressed.

A great way to ease the stress for both of you and create a deeper bond is through meditation. [Pet Healing Meditations and Visualization CDs](#) are an excellent tool for improving health for both you and your four legged friend. It may sound a bit "new age," however scientific studies at major universities have demonstrated the power of meditation and healing with visualization.

[Flower Essences](#) are another excellent stress reduction and emotional support tool. Cats are especially responsive to flower essences and can benefit greatly from their use. There is a flower essence designed for every emotional state, so look through the large selection and choose the one or two remedies that best match your companion's issues. Dosing can be as simple as adding a few drops to the water or massaging them onto your pet's ears or paws.

Please see the following articles in our Holistic Healthcare Database for more information: "[Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease](#)," "[Ash, Magnesium and FLUTD](#)," "[Flower Essences and How They Work](#)," and "[Treating Mild Anxiety](#)."

## **9. Changing formulas or brands of pet foods is hard on a dog or cat's digestion.**

A healthy dog or cat can eat a different food at each meal without issue - provided they are high-quality foods. Holistically minded guardians and veterinarians know that variety is important for several reasons. The most important of these is to avoid the development of sensitivities to any particular food or protein type. When the same food is fed for many months or years at a time, an animal can develop an allergy or sensitivity to that food or a specific ingredient in the food. Many holistic veterinarians believe that feeding the same food for many years is a contributing factor to the development of inflammatory bowel disease.

Variety provides a wider range of nutrition for your companion as well. While foods may be formulated to meet AAFCO standards, that does not mean that every food that meets those standards meets the needs of every dog or cat. As a matter of fact, there are many foods on the market that meet AAFCO standards that many cats and dogs cannot tolerate due to the grains and grain by-products used as protein sources. A more diverse diet is more likely to meet the nutritional needs of your companion over time. Besides all that - would YOU want to eat the same meal day in and day out for months at a time? Even if there was a "people kibble" that was formulated to meet all your nutritional needs - would you really enjoy that? And remember - every meal does not need to be perfectly balanced as long as the diet is balanced over the course of a week or so.

Whenever feeding a diet of cooked or processed food, digestive enzymes are essential, and will help your companion transition from one type of food to another with each other. Digestive enzymes help animals maintain a healthy digestive tract and get the most nutrition from their food. Essential fatty acids from fish oil provide the omega 3 fatty acids missing from most processed pet foods that nourish the skin, coat and digestive tract. Probiotics are important for animals on medication or those experiencing digestive upsets. For animals in need of increased support due to chronic digestive issues, GI Support provides herbs and nutrients to soothe and heal the lining of the digestive tract.

## **10. It is fine for dogs and cats to eat each other's food.**

While there are a few canned formulas available that meet the needs of both species, most foods are designed specifically for cats or dogs. Cats require a higher percentage of protein and fat than most dogs and they have specific requirements for additional taurine. Dogs that eat too much cat food are at risk of weight gain and even pancreatitis. Cats that eat dog food are at risk of weight gain when the food is high in carbohydrates, as well as more likely to develop deficiencies in important amino acids like Taurine.

If Fido and Fluffy insist on sharing, try a food formulated to meet both their needs such as [Nature's Variety Instinct Canned Diets](#) - the pictures on the cans are different, but the contents are the same. Or try an all-meat variety like [Wysong's Au Jus](#) or [Evanger's Game Meats](#) to supplement their individual meals.

A note from Dr. Fenton on this article:

This is a wonderfully written and very informative outline debunking many pet food myths I hear from my well-intentioned but misinformed clients on a daily basis. Aside from the facts being exposed very explicitly—all of which I support—many products from Only Natural Pet have been referenced and I do not support the use of all of them. It is always best to have a holistic veterinarian evaluate your pet for what is right for him or her on an *individual* basis. No article, no matter how well it is written or the information contained therein, could ever replace true veterinary care.

Yours in Animal Health and Healing,

Dr. Fenton