



## Is a Grain Free Food Right for Your Pet?

It's not unusual to see health trends and even specific types of diets for people mirrored in our pets. An unfortunate example is that as the human obesity epidemic in North America has grown, so has the number of chubby, flabby and obese pets. But now, some pet owners are turning to another human craze, grain-free diets, as a means to solve health issues. So, is a grain free food the correct answer for what ails your pet?

As a society, we have become very concerned about our diet and a number of health issues related to our consumption of various foods. Gluten sensitivity in people is just one example and it has led to many looking at "whole food" diets or even eating only foods that our Paleolithic ancestors consumed. Naturally, pet owners will translate these concerns to their cats and dogs and look for more natural diets for their four legged friends.

Pet food marketers have been quick to respond to the public's desire for grain free options in their lines of food. Catchy brand names like "Taste of the Wild", "Natural Balance" or "Earthborn" tempt the human shoppers. But, are these pet owners choosing a diet simply based on marketing hype and the sales pitch in the store?

Many believe that the gluten sensitivities common in people are also a widespread problem in pets and chose a diet based on a lack of specific ingredients, such as wheat. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that these particular problems occur regularly in dogs or cats. Gluten-sensitive intolerances are documented in Irish Setters, but, to date, we simply don't know if other breeds are affected and the problem has not proven to be widespread.

Another frequent reason for choosing a grain free pet food is that the owner believes that wheat, corn or some other grain is highly allergenic and causes food allergies for their pets. The fallacy here is that many dogs are actually allergic to the proteins in the food. In a review of 267 cases, wheat actually was responsible for fewer canine allergy cases than beef and dairy and corn comes in at a distant 8th, behind chicken, egg and lamb.

Some owners mistakenly believe that "grain-free" equates to low, or even no, carbohydrates. Dr. Susan Wynn, a well-known speaker on clinical nutrition and integrative medicine, remarks, "if the pet food is a dry kibble, it contains carbohydrates." The manufacturing process to produce the dry diets (known as extrusion) won't work unless a minimal level of starch is present.

Dr. Lori Huston, a Certified Veterinary Journalist and author of the Pet Health Care Gazette blog concurs. She even mentions that many of the popular replacements for grains, like potatoes, can actually increase the carbohydrate content of the food.

Finally, a common myth is that our pets are unable to effectively digest the grains present in commercial diets. The reality is that dogs do quite well digesting grains and starches. Not only has decades of research proven this, but new genetic information shows our domesticated canine friends have many more copies of a gene for amylase than their wolf cousins. This important enzyme helps cut starch molecules and enables dogs to effectively use grains as an energy source.

All of the above reasons aside, is there a downside to feeding grain free foods? In some cases, the levels of fat or protein may be higher than necessary for some pets and that could contribute to health issues such as kidney failure. To quote Dr. Wynn, since “excess protein is not stored by the body, high protein diets are often simply good for producing expensive urine.”

To investigate any food you are going to feed your pet, you should call or email the company to see if they have invested the time and funds to do a food trial on real pets. All the company needs to do is trial the food on 8 adult pets for 6 months or just 2 months for puppies/kittens and make sure they are healthy at the end. You may be surprised to see how many companies have not bothered to do a food trial. The pet food industry is vying for your hard earned dollar. You want to find a company that is putting some of their earnings back into research to make sure the food is safe for your pet.

What kind of protein is best for your pet? For years I thought that chicken meal was an inferior ingredient full of bones /cartilage and indigestible material. Recently I learned that the ingredient “chicken” of the food bag could legally include skin and chicken with the bones and cartilage. We picture a nice filet of chicken when we see chicken on the ingredient list but it is just not the case.

When a dog or cat takes down prey in the wild it will ingest the meat and also enjoy the liver heart lungs intestines kidneys. Cats will crunch and ingest the bones of mice and birds. Dogs will gnaw on the bones to get the cartilage off and then start in on the bone itself. The entrails and cartilage and bones are a part of their normal diet. Please do not feed bones to your pet as they can often get caught and cause obstructions.

Chicken meal contains the same ingredients but is boiled to eliminate bacteria and dried down to 10% moisture, 65% protein before it is incorporated into the food. This is a way to get more protein into the food for less weight. Pure chicken is 70% moisture, 18% protein and is very heavy to put into the food. So chicken meal is not the evil ingredient that some raw food manufacturers make it out to be.

If grain free is an option that interests you for your pet’s diet, talk with your veterinarian. She can help you sort through the myths and misconceptions that so often abound when it comes to pet foods. This is especially important when it comes to food allergies. Over the counter (OTC) “hypoallergenic” foods can often confound a food allergy diagnosis. Studies have shown that these OTC foods may often contain the very allergens the owner is trying to avoid and cross contamination in the manufacturing process is a common

occurrence. In addition, one well known OTC pet food manufacturer was reprimanded by the FDA after lab analysis showed their lamb diet contained no lamb, but beef instead!

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