

## Choosing the Right Dog Food

---

There is heated discussion out there regarding the value of packaged dog food versus home-cooked food versus raw food. Experts tell us that there are great benefits to cooking fresh, dog-appropriate, food at home as well as to feeding your dog an appropriate raw food diet. However, since many dog owners can't see themselves with either the time, the inclination, or the resources to offer these "menus," they often reach for the quick-and-easy packaged dry food on the store shelf.

So, how can you tell the difference between better-quality packaged dry food (kibble) and poor-quality kibble?

Research and experience suggest three main areas you should consider. I also recommend an excellent resource guide -- *The Whole Dog Journal*, a monthly publication that talks about foods as well as other topics on natural dog care and dog training. In some ways the *Consumer Reports* of the doggie world, *WDJ* periodically tests new dog foods that come onto the market, compares them with other major brands, and posts the results.

### **Collaborate with your veterinarian.**

Every dog is an individual, so what works for Reggie won't necessarily work for Lulu. Ask your vet if there are breed-related nutritional requirements for your particular dog. See to it that you have a clear understanding of your dog's ideal weight at different ages and stages of growth. And find out if certain health conditions could be diet-related.

### **Follow food selection guidelines.**

What dogs need – protein, fat, vitamins and minerals. Ingredients should be listed on the package in descending order of weight.

- **Protein:** Should be high-quality animal protein, and should be first on the list. Look for whole meat (listed as either chicken, fish, lamb, duck, etc.)
- **Fat:** The species the fat comes from should be identified (e.g., chicken fat).
- **Vitamins and Minerals:** Vitamins are destroyed in the cooking process and need to be added afterward. Look for vitamin/mineral content and consult with your vet on which ones are needed and in what proportions. Many vets and nutritionists say that adding them after the fact is not as effective. Synthetic vitamins are supposedly not absorbed as well by the body (either canine or human!) as vitamins found in a natural diet. Feeding your dog appropriate fresh vegetables and fruits can provide the missing nutrients. Not all veggies or fruits are good for him, so check with your vet.

Good to have – organic ingredients; easy-to-read date/production code; caloric content; manufacturer's contact information; successful AAFCO feeding trial.

What to avoid – any protein or fat source that is not identified by species (e.g., "animal digest," "animal fat" or any ingredient labeled "meal" or "by-product," even if the species is named (e.g., lamb meal, chicken by-products); artificial colors, flavors, preservatives; added sweeteners. Dogs don't need carbohydrates to live. However, grains are often used as a source of energy and a cheap filler. Grains that are high on the list of ingredients indicate a lower quality food.

### **Keep a record of your dog's health and diet.**

Track, in writing, your dog's health when on a particular brand of kibble. Note the positive as well as negative aspects of his health (e.g., is coat glossy or dull; are ears and teeth clean; do ears or coat or teeth smell bad; how's the appetite/energy level; is stool normal or not). If you decide to change your dog's food, do so gradually, and with your vet's input. A quick switch can cause stomach upset. Feed your dog at regular intervals (e.g., 7 a.m. and 6 p.m.) and pick the bowl up if he hasn't finished the contents in 15 minutes or so. "Free feeding" (bowl is down all day) doesn't let you anticipate his elimination schedule or easily detect a change in appetite (which could be a sign of illness).

