



Choosing the Best Food for Your Dog by Robin Knepp Bennett

As professional dog trainer, I talk to many owners who are concerned about their dog's hyperactivity, lack of focus, and general inability to learn. Owners are often surprised to learn some of their concerns can be resolved, in part, by a change in diet. Since a dog's diet can have a dramatic influence on the animal's mood, ability to learn and overall health, behavioral counseling always includes information on choosing the best food for the dog.

With so many different brands of dog foods on the market today, choosing a healthy diet for your dog can be overwhelming. I will attempt to discuss some common areas of concern in choosing the best food for your dog.

How do you decipher dog food labels? Just as with human food labels, dog food ingredients are listed in descending order by weight. We know in choosing cereal for our children, a listing of ingredients that displays sugar first contains more sugar than any other ingredient. The same is true of dog food. The combination of the first three ingredients makes up the bulk of the food and is usually indicative of the overall quality of the food. Finding a meat source listed as the tenth or eleventh item in the list usually means very little meat is actually used.

Which ingredients should be listed first? A healthy diet should be based on an adequate, and clearly defined, protein source such as beef, chicken, or lamb (not something vague such as "meat" or "poultry"). Ingredients may list "by-products" or "meal". Generally speaking, meal is the better option. By-products are those items left over after the meat is removed from the animal source. Since by-products are not actually meat, they can often be difficult for your pet to digest.

Lamb, chicken, or beef meal, on the other hand, is the meat after the water and fat have been removed. Meal is highly digestible and filled with approximately 65 percent protein. Grains are often included in dog food because they are a cheaper alternative to quality meat sources. However, a larger volume of food must be eaten to fulfill the nutritional needs of the dog if grains are used as the primary protein source.

Are any ingredients bad for my dog? In people, a diet free of chemicals, colorings, and other fillers is considered far superior than one that is pre-fabricated and chemically preserved. The same is true for dogs. Chemicals and other

additives are used in dog foods for several reasons: to make the food more palatable to the dog; to make the food more appealing to the human eye; or to preserve the dog food. However, dog food free of chemicals and naturally preserved is better for your dog. Constantly eating chemicals, food coloring, additives and other fillers is no better for our pets than it would be for us.

Corn, a relatively inexpensive ingredient used in many dog foods, has been linked with some behavioral concerns. Recent studies indicate corn can inhibit the intake of serotonin, which makes it more difficult for the dog to "chill out" and focus on training.

Better quality diets are made without preservatives or artificial colorings. The chemicals BHA and BHT are a particular concern when used in foods. These products are usually added to preserve the food but have also been shown to cause cancer in livestock. Most dog food manufacturers are beginning to take BHA and BHT from their food lines. A better preservative for dog food is Vitamin E or Vitamin C.

Are some dog food brands better than others? Generally speaking, most dog foods can be classified into three primary categories: commercial brands, premium brands, and super premium brands. The commercial brands are usually found in supermarkets and grocery stores. These brands are, by far, the cheapest in terms of cost per pound. A cheaper price usually means cheaper ingredients. Although the cost per pound is relatively low, owners feeding commercial brands will have to feed a much larger portion to their dog in order to meet the animal's nutritional requirements.

Premium brands are usually better quality than the commercial brands. They tend to be slightly more expensive, but feeding requirements are slightly less than commercial brands. In other words, smaller amounts of the higher quality foods can be fed to achieve the correct nutritional level.

In today's market, a new classification of foods has been developed. These foods, known as super premium dog foods, take a holistic approach to dog feeding. They usually have the highest quality ingredients and often use more high-quality meats and meal as the main source of protein as compared to commercial and premium brands, which use

mostly grains. The super premium brands contain no "fillers" such as artificial colorings, flavoring, or chemicals, and they are usually preserved with Vitamins E and C. Super premium brands are usually purchased through distributors or shipped directly to your door from the company (usually at no cost). The food is usually prepared in small batches and is fresher than commercial or premium brands.

How do you know if your dog is eating a well-balanced diet? First, examine the overall health of the dog. The eyes should sparkle, the ears should look clean and smell fresh, and the coat should be glossy. If your dog has chronic ear or eye infections, has red or draining eyes, licks his paws all the time, or constantly bites at himself (as if he has fleas although you can't find fleas), talk to your vet or a holistic health practitioner about possible food or environmental allergies.

Dogs, like people, can have allergies and illnesses due to a weakened immune system. The immune system may fail after repeated ingestion of a poor quality diet. The effects may not be immediate but may be caused by a gradual chemical build up that weakens the immune system over time. Dogs can also be allergic to items in the food, such as wheat or beef, which can cause health problems.

Some behavioral problems caused by an inadequate diet may include: extreme bouts of hyperactivity, short attention span, or inability to learn.

Owners of dogs with such problems often describe the dogs as unruly, untrainable, and wild. I compare these dogs to

children after they have eaten a large volume of candy. The child, like the dog, will have no attention span due to the inadequate diet. However, for the dog, the same "junk food" is being fed day after day, and the dog will always appear hyperactive.

Other complaints come from owners who describe their dogs as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in that the dog's personality seems to change dramatically throughout the day. One minute the dog is sweet and peaceful, the next minute the dog is racing around the room, biting and snapping at everything. Often the change in behavior can be linked to the feeding schedule.

If your dog displays any of the problems mentioned in this article, or if you would like to improve your dog's overall health and appearance, consider a change in diet. If your dog is on a particular diet due to a medical condition, be sure to talk to your vet before switching food.

If you decide to switch foods, make the change a gradual one since a sudden change in diet can upset the dog's digestive system and cause diarrhea.

All About Dogs recommends choosing a food recommended by "**Whole Dog Journal**," the periodical rated number one for health and behavior information by the members of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT). All of these recommended choices are indicated with boldface type in the list of dog foods that begins on page 3.

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Dog Food Labeling Rules

(from p. 71 of *Dog Health & Nutrition for Dummies*, by Christine Zink)

Beef for dogs: Must contain 95% beef by weight

Beef dog food: Must contain 70% beef by weight

Beef dinner, beef entree, or beef platter: Must contain 25% beef by weight

Dog food with beef: Needs to contain only 3% beef

Beef-flavored: Doesn't need to contain any beef; it just needs to taste like beef (using artificial flavors)

Vocabulary 101 (p. 75)

Animal by-product meal: Rendered animal tissues that don't fit any of the other ingredient definitions. It can't contain hair, horns, hoofs, hide trimmings, manure, or intestinal contents or extraneous materials.

By-products: Meat by-products are non-human-grade proteins obtained from animal carcasses. They can vary

greatly in their digestibility, and there is no way to for the consumer to determine their digestibility.

Meat: Clean flesh of slaughtered cattle, swine, sheep, or goats. It must come from muscle, tongue, diaphragm, heart, or esophagus.

Meat and bone meal: Rendered from mammal tissues, including bone. Other than that, it is similar to meat meal.

Meat by-products: Fresh, non-rendered, clean parts of slaughtered mammals. It does not include meat, but does include lungs, spleens, kidneys, brains, livers, blood, bones, fat, stomachs, and intestines. It cannot include hair, horns, teeth, or hoofs.

Meat meal: Rendered meal made from animal tissues. It cannot contain blood, hair, hoofs, hide trimmings, manure, or intestinal contents or extraneous material. It may not contain more than 14% indigestible materials. Lamb meal is made from lamb parts. Meat meal is made from cattle, swine, sheep, or goats.

Poultry (or chicken or turkey) by-product meal: Ground, rendered, clean parts of the carcass of slaughtered poultry, such as necks, feet, undeveloped eggs, and intestines. It cannot contain beaks or feathers.

Poultry (or chicken or turkey) by-products: Non-rendered clean parts of slaughtered poultry such as heads, feet, and guts. It must not contain feces or foreign matter.

Rendering: The process by which animal parts are heated slowly over a long period of time to liquefy the fat so it can be removed. What remains is mainly dry proteins and is called *meal*. (You partly render your bacon when you put it on a paper towel before putting it in the microwave. The heat liquefies the fat, which drips onto the paper towel. The bacon comes out dry and crispy.)

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Top Three Ingredients in Popular Dog Foods (Boldface type indicates one of Whole Dog Journal's recommended foods)

Active Care Lamb & Rice . . . brown rice, lamb meal, bovine cartilage

Alpo . . . ground yellow corn, wheat middlings (a granular product of milling), meat & bone meal

Artemis . . . chicken meal, turkey meal, brown rice

Authority Chicken . . . chicken meal, brewer's rice, corn gluten meal

Authority Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, ground yellow corn

Authority Puppy Lamb . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, wheat

Avoderm Chicken & Rice . . . Chicken Meal, Brown Rice, Ground Rice

Avoderm Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, brown rice, ground rice

Avoderm Puppy . . . chicken meal, brown rice, ground rice

Azmira . . . beef meal, whole ground barley, oatmeal

Back to Basics . . . chicken meal, ground corn, chicken fat

Bench & Field . . . chicken meal, ground brown rice, whole ground barley

Beneful . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-product meal, corn gluten meal

Bil-Jac . . . chicken by-products, chicken, corn

③ Blue Adult . . . chicken, chicken meal, ground brown rice

③ Blue Puppy . . . chicken, chicken meal, ground brown rice

③ Blue Senior . . . chicken, whole ground brown rice, oatmeal

Burns . . . brown rice, ocean fish meal, peas

By Nature BrightLife . . . chicken meal, lamb meal, barley

① California Natural . . . lamb meal, brown rice, rice

Canidae . . . chicken meal, turkey meal, brown rice

Canine R/D Prescription Diet . . . ground corn, peanut hulls, poultry by-product meal

Canine Caterers . . . see "Nature's Select"

Canine Caviar Chicken & Pearl Millet, Adult . . . chicken meal, pearl millet, brown rice

Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover's Soul, Adult . . . chicken, turkey, chicken meal

Cloud Star Kibble Chicken . . . chicken meal, barley, brown rice

Cowboy Cookout . . . beef, beef liver, beef meal

Cycle Adult . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-product meal, feeding oatmeal

Drs Foster & Smith Chicken & Brown Rice . . . chicken, chicken meal, brown rice

Drs Foster & Smith Lamb & Brown Rice . . . lamb meal, lamb, brown rice

Drs Foster & Smith Puppy . . . chicken, chicken meal, brown rice

Drs Foster & Smith Senior . . . chicken, brown rice, rice

② Eagle Pack Holistic Select Chicken . . . chicken meal, ground brown rice, whole ground barley

② Eagle Pack Holistic Select Fish & Oatmeal . . . anchovy, sardine, and salmon meal, oatmeal, ground brown rice

② Eagle Pack Holistic Select Lamb . . . lamb meal, ground brown rice, oatmeal

Eagle Pack Large & Giant Breed Puppy . . . lamb meal, ground brown rice, ground yellow corn

Eagle Pack Natural . . . lamb meal, ground brown rice, ground yellow corn

Eagle Pack Power . . . chicken meal, ground yellow corn, ground brown rice

Eagle Pack Small & Medium Breed Puppy . . . chicken meal, ground yellow corn, ground brown rice

Eukanuba Lamb & Rice . . . lamb, rice flour, ground yellow corn

Eukanuba Maintenance . . . chicken, chicken by-products meal, corn meal

Eukanuba Premium Performance . . . chicken, chicken by-products, ground corn

Eukanuba Puppy Lamb & Rice . . . Lamb, Brewers Rice, Corn Meal

Evo . . . turkey, chicken, turkey meal

Evolve, Adult . . . lamb, chicken meal, brown rice

Fit & Trim . . . ground yellow corn, soybean meal, soybean hulls

Flint River Ranch . . . chicken meal, wheat flour, ground rice

- Flint River Ranch Dry Water** . . . chicken meal, whole wheat flour, whole chicken
- Flint River Ranch LC** . . . chicken meal, wheat flour, ground rice
- Foundations Chicken & Vegetables** . . . chicken meal, hullless barley, oatmeal
- Fromm Four Star Duck & Sweet Potato** . . . duck, duck meal, pearled barley
- Giant brand . . . ground yellow corn, corn gluten meal, soybean meal
- Go! Natural** . . . chicken meal, chicken meat, whole brown rice
- Gravy Train Beef Flavor . . . corn, soybean meal, meat and bone meal
- Health Food for Dogs . . . chicken meal, brown rice, ground rice
- Hi Pro . . . ground yellow corn, corn gluten meal, ground brewer's rice
- ① **Hund-n-Flocken** . . . lamb meal, ground millet, ground brown rice
- lams Chunks & Mini-Chunks . . . chicken, corn meal, ground grain sorghum (tropical grass related to Indian corn)
- lams Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, rice flour, corn meal
- lams Lamb & Rice Puppy . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, corn meal
- lams Large Breed . . . chicken, corn meal, ground whole grain sorghum
- lams Large Breed Puppy . . . chicken, corn meal, ground whole grain sorghum
- lams Original Puppy . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, corn meal
- ① **Innova** . . . turkey, chicken, chicken meal
- ① **Karma** . . . free-range chicken, kamut, brown rice
- Kibbles & Bits . . . ground yellow corn, ground wheat, soybean flour
- Kirkland Chicken & Rice . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, whole grain brown rice
- Kirkland Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, rice flour, whole grain brown rice
- Life's abundance . . . chicken meal, ground brown rice, potato product
- Lifespan** . . . chicken, chicken meal, ground whole brown rice
- Limited Diets Duck & Potato** . . . potatoes, duck, duck meal
- ① **MMillenia** . . . beef meal, ground barley, ground brown rice
- Natural Balance Beef (roll) . . . Beef, beef hearts, beef kidneys
- Natural Balance Lamb & Rice (roll) . . . Lamb, lamb hearts, lamb kidneys
- Natural Balance Potato & Duck . . . Potatoes, duck, duck meal
- ② **Natural Balance Ultra Premium** . . . chicken, brown rice, duck
- ③ **Natural Choice Ultra, Adult** . . . chicken meal, brown rice, rice
- Nature's Best . . . brewer's rice, ground wheat, turkey meal
- Nature's Recipe Chicken Meal . . . chicken meal, ground rice, cracked pearl barley
- Nature's Recipe Dog . . . ground wheat, ground brown rice, wheat bran
- Nature's Select Chicken, Rice, & Lamb . . . chicken meal, ground rice, rice bran
- Nature's Select Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, ground rice, rice flour
- Nature's Select Puppy . . . chicken meal, ground rice, poultry fat
- Nature's Select Ultra-Lite/Senior . . . ground rice, ground barley, poultry meal
- Newman's Own Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken, barley, rice
- Nutro Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, ground rice, rice bran
- Nutro Max . . . chicken meal, wheat flour, ground rice
- Nutro Max Large Breed . . . Beef Meal, Ground Rice, Rice Flour
- Nutro Max Mini-Chunk . . . Chicken Meal, Wheat Flour, Ground Whole Wheat
- Nutro Max Puppy . . . Chicken Meal, Corn Gluten Meal, Wheat Flour
- Nutro Natural Choice Chicken & Rice . . . chicken meal, ground rice, rice bran
- Nutro Natural Choice High Energy . . . chicken meal, ground rice, corn gluten meal
- Nutro Natural Choice Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, ground rice, rice flour
- Nutro Natural Choice Ultra . . . chicken meal, brown rice, ground rice
- Old Roy . . . ground yellow corn, meat and bone meal, corn gluten meal
- ONE Beef . . . beef, brewer's rice, ground yellow corn
- ONE Chicken . . . chicken, ground yellow corn, ground wheat
- ONE Lamb & Rice . . . lamb, brewer's rice, ground yellow corn
- ONE Large-Breed Adult . . . Chicken, brewers rice, whole grain corn
- ONE Large Breed Puppy . . . Chicken, corn gluten meal, brewers rice
- ONE Puppy . . . lamb, brewer's rice, corn gluten meal
- Organix Canine Formula** . . . chicken, chicken meal, peas
- Pedigree Lamb & Rice . . . ground corn, chicken by-product meal, ground wheat
- Pedigree Performance . . . ground corn, chicken by-products, chicken meal
- Pedigree Puppy . . . rice, ground corn, chicken by product meal
- Pet Gold Chicken & Rice . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, whole grain brown rice
- Pet Gold Lamb & Rice . . . lamb, lamb meal, brewer's rice
- Pet Gold Puppy Chicken & Rice . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, whole grain brown rice
- Pet Gold Senior Chicken & Rice . . . chicken, chicken by-product meal, whole grain brown rice
- Petsmart Premier Chicken . . . chicken, wheat flour, chicken meal
- Petsmart Premier Chicken Puppy . . . chicken, wheat flour, chicken meal
- Petsmart Premier Lamb . . . lamb, wheat flour, lamb meal
- PHD Canine Growth & Maintenance** . . . lamb meal, poultry meal, brown rice

Pinnacle Chicken & Oats . . . chicken meal, chicken, whole oat flour

Pinnacle Trout & Sweet Potato . . . Trout, Oatmeal, Toasted Oats

❶ **Prairie Beef & Barley** . . . beef, barley, brown rice

❶ **Prairie Chicken & Rice** . . . chicken, brown rice, barley

❶ **Prairie Lamb & Rice** . . . lamb, brown rice, barley

Premium Edge, Adult . . . chicken, chicken meal, brown rice

Prime Life . . . chicken meal, turkey meal, whole brown rice

Pro Plan Adult . . . beef, brewer's rice, ground wheat

Pro Plan Chicken & Rice . . . chicken, brewer's rice, ground wheat

Pro Plan Large-Breed Puppy . . .

Pro Plan Performance . . . chicken, corn gluten meal, brewer's rice

Pro Plan Puppy Chicken & Rice Formula . . . chicken, brewer's rice, poultry by-product meal

Purina Dog Chow . . . ground yellow corn, soybean meal, meat & bone meal

Purina Puppy Chow Balanced Nutrition . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-products meal, corn gluten meal

Purina Puppy Chow Beef . . . ground yellow corn, corn gluten meal, brewer's rice

Purina Puppy Chow Healthy Morsels . . . ground yellow corn, corn gluten meal, whole wheat flour

Purina Puppy Chow Large Breed . . . ground yellow corn, chicken by-products meal, corn gluten meal

Regal Adult Bites . . . turkey meal, ground rice, corn meal

Royal Canin Maxi . . . chicken meal, brewers rice, brown rice

Royal Canin Mini . . . chicken, brewer's rice, chicken meal

❷ **Royal Canin Natural Blend Holistic** . . . chicken meal, brown rice, oatmeal

❷ **Royal Canine Natural Blend Holistic, Puppy** . . . chicken, brown rice, chicken meal

Science Diet Canine Growth . . . ground corn, poultry by-products meal, soybean meal

Science Diet Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, rice flour

Science Diet Large Breed Puppy . . . corn meal, chicken by-product meal, corn gluten meal

Science Diet Savory Recipe . . . beef, brewer's rice, rice flour

Science Diet Sensitive Skin . . . brewer's rice, corn meal, corn gluten meal

Science Diet Sensitive Stomach . . . brewer's rice, corn meal, corn gluten meal

Sensible Choice Chicken & Rice . . . chicken meal, brewer's rice, rice hulls

Sensible Choice Lamb & Rice . . . lamb meal, brewer's rice, rice hulls

Showbound Naturals . . . chicken, chicken meal, brown rice

Timberwolf Organics . . . lamb meal, ground oats, ground barley

Verus . . . chicken meal, ground oat groats, ground brown rice

Waltham Growth . . . chicken by-products, ground rice, ground corn

Waltham High Performance . . . chicken by-products, ground corn, corn gluten meal

❶ **Wellness Fish & Sweet Potato** . . . white fish, ground barley, rye flour

Wellness Simple Food Solutions, Venison . . . brown rice, venison, brown rice protein (good choice for allergy elimination diet)

❶ **Wellness Super5Mix, Chicken** . . . chicken, ground barley, oatmeal

❶ **Wellness Super5Mix, Lamb** . . . lamb, lamb meal, white fish

❶ **Wellness Super5Mix Puppy** . . . deboned chicken, salmon meal, menhaden fishmeal

Wysong . . . chicken, chicken meal, ground brown rice

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All of these foods can be ordered over the internet and delivered to your door. Quality foods available in local stores have been marked with numbers to help you locate them.

❶ = Available at **Booth Feeds**

5037 Plank Road, Fredericksburg, VA 22407, 540-786-5919

8390 Telegraph Road, Lorton, VA 22079, 703-339-7268

8300 Rugby Road, Manassas, VA 20111, 703-368-0077

1186 Warrenton Rd, Stafford, VA 22406, 540-286-0007

❷ = Available at **Petco**

❸ = Available at **Petsmart**