

How to Select a Pet Food that is Right for You and Your Pet

By Cherri Pursell

Have you ever wondered why one food costs so much more than another? Ever been online and seen discussions of ingredients as if that was the most important factor to choose a food by? I have, but I often wonder why many times they overlook the most important information on the bag which is the Guaranteed Analysis. The GA (Guaranteed Analysis), that little box or listing of percentages of different things, tells you so much more about a food than the name or the ingredient list. It lists the minimum amount of protein and fat, moisture content, fiber content and many times the kcal content. What are Kcals; calories which equal energy. The amount of energy in a food determines how much of that food will need to be fed. Regardless of the wonderful ingredient panel a food can have a very low kcal amount or one for maintenance only. This will not help you if you have a very active dog, a puppy or a bitch in whelp or nursing. A lower kcal content will only cause you to use up the food faster as the dog has energy needs based on their activity level and reproductive status as well as their health status and age and they will consume a product until those needs are met. For instance a food can have 25% protein but only 340 kcals per cup as compared to a food with 25% protein and 450 kcals per cup, that is almost double the amount.

When it comes to pet food selection you really want to simply flip the bag over and read the GA. Note the fiber level is it 3% or 6%? Fiber is often used by lesser quality foods to fill up a dog or by foods made for overweight dogs. Is the fat level 12% or 16%? Fat is the preferred energy source for dogs and a lower fat level will most definitely mean a lower kcal level for that food. I have seen foods with fat levels between 8-12% and have seen these foods advertised for all life stages. While a food like this could be used in that manner it will take quite a bit of that food to meet your dog's needs and leads to more expense for the owner. The moisture level is typically the same for all foods and is not something you need to really compare. Looking at the protein level, fat level and fiber will give you an idea of the make up of that food and the possible calorie content if it is not provided on the label. The AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) is currently considering requiring all manufacturers to list the kcal content of their foods per cup to make it easy for consumers to properly select the right food for their animal.

Don't misunderstand me in that ingredients are not important, they are but you can find the fanciest and "best" ingredient panel on the planet but the food can also be the least cost efficient food on the planet as well. Consumers want quality along with value and there are many products on the market that fulfill both these needs you just have to know how to find them. Digestibility is also important. If a food looks great and the price is great but your dog is not digesting it properly or is intolerant to it you must select something else. How do you determine digestibility? By stool formation, dog's condition and energy level. If your dog is losing weight, moping around, acting hungry and having large light colored stools they may not be digesting the product very well.

Of course the other important topic involved here is price. Foods that make sure that all of the proper nutrients are present and digestible as well as having the proper energy levels will be more expensive than those that do not. Also, some products do tons of research and testing to determine the proper nutrition for animals and they have to pass this cost on somewhere; to the consumer, maybe not much but at least some of the cost. The bottom line is be educated, look at the GA when selecting a food, call the manufacturer if you must to find out the kcal amount per cup if it is not listed on the bag (in the 400's is a good level for All life Stages and in the 350's or around that is good for maintenance and less active animals) watch your animal to be sure that the product is a good match and also watch the amount fed to see if it is good for you economically. Some foods may be worth that high price but there are many excellent products with economical prices to choose from. Watch out for those foods that are too low in cost as it does cost a bit to prepare a proper product. Too low a cost could mean that corners are being cut somewhere again, look to the GA and you can sort out the reasonable from the inflated priced foods. Most of the older manufactures have products they have been working on for years. Many claim these products are not "good" based on their ingredient panel but these people also will ignore the GA and not realize that these foods have been in the making for years and that manufactures have learned many things over their time in operation that causes them to construct their products the way they do; many newer manufactures will employ the formulators of these products to help them formulate their foods and then they will make sure the ingredient panel is "humanistically" acceptable, slap a high price on it and claim it is better when in reality the best dog food is the one your dog does best on and the one that is economically acceptable to you.