

What's Really in the Bag?

An Informative Look at Food Label Ingredients

Your dog's diet is the single most important factor for her health and longevity. Because of this, you'll want to purchase the healthiest food you can afford. But it's not easy to know what's *really* inside that bag of pet food you're choosing. The labels on the cans and the bags of many dog foods don't provide a realistic indication of what's actually inside. In both the wording and graphic presentation, images and euphemisms that make the food seem healthful and appealing are, at best, deceiving and confusing. It's fully intended to be deceiving. It's called *marketing!*

The appearance of the dog food itself is often designed to be just as deceiving as the design on the bag. Some semi-dry dog foods have been formulated to resemble real foods, such as chunks of beef or cheese. These, in fact, are some of the worst offenders in the rogue's gallery of canine junk food. These foods usually consist of poor quality protein jazzed up with the likes of propylene glycol and corn syrup, along with a number of harmful preservatives and dyes.

"Now there's *real* meat in the bag!" is, perhaps, the most revealing marketing scam. What was in the bag before? And how much "real" meat is proportionally in the food now? Both the camouflages and the hypes used by dog food manufacturers aren't intended to fool your dog, but rather to persuade you—the consumer—to purchase their products. The marketing game is not about your dog's food or health; it's about reaching far into your wallet for profit. No dog really cares what color the food is, nor will she be influenced by high-powered TV commercials. But one thing's for certain: When a company spends millions to advertise a product,

that cost is reflected in the retail price at the expense of quality. You, in essence, are paying largely for the advertising used to entice a purchase rather than the cost of the actual ingredients. This means that when you buy a large bag of a heavily-advertised brand for a relatively low price, you're getting even less than what you pay for in terms of value. By contrast, one reason that smaller, holistic and healthy brands are apt to give you a lot more for your money is that they invest in quality ingredients rather than in costly advertising campaigns.

The good news for you is that many pet food brands known for their wholesome preparation take very special care to avoid noxious ingredients. In fact, many have gone "hog wild" to make sure they know a product's source and keep a watchful eye on ingredient input and product output. After all, reputation and future sales depend on integrity.

Once upon a time, I thought the labels reflected exactly what was in the bag. Although this is not always the case, I can still share with you information that will help you choose the best food for your dog.

With dog food, you get what you pay for. The smaller companies, whose aim is to provide healthful prepared food, typically spend less on advertising their products, which are usually sold in smaller specialty pet stores. Instead, their money goes into creating quality food. While these brands are more expensive than the cheapest supermarket brand, they are well worth the money. Better food means fewer health problems in the long run.

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Look for words that indicate that whole foods are present in the bag.

CHOOSE
chicken

Instead of
chicken byproducts
poultry meal
meat*
meat byproducts



*Meat is defined as the flesh of an animal that is edible, but exactly which animals (or animal parts) being used is unclear. Look for specific meats such as chicken.

PICK
wheat

wheat bran
wheat gluten
wheat mill run
cereal fines
corn gluten

NOT

If you want to avoid wheat in your dog's food, there are now many foods that use barley, sweet potatoes, and other healthy grains and carbohydrates. Look for clear words—barley, sweet potato, etc.

ALWAYS
rice

rice flour
rice bran
brewers rice

NEVER

The more generic the term, the more likely the ingredient is undesirable. *Animal fat* is too general a term and can refer to restaurant grease. *Animal digest* is the enzymatic decomposition of animal tissue. *Poultry byproduct* and *poultry byproduct meal* is composed of the heads, feet, and bowels of fowl. Rather than an enigmatic euphemism, look for direct and simple wording that defines the ingredient.

It is not in your dog's best interest to buy foods containing artificial colors and flavors or toxic preservatives, such as BHA and BHT. Natural preservatives are usually made from antioxidants like vitamins C or E. You'll see them printed under dog food ingredients using some form of the word *tocopherol* or *ascorbate*. Watch out for the imitation-meat moist dog food packs and doggie snacks because they often contain propylene glycol to make them look moist and meaty and are coated with sugars to enhance taste.

Take the time to compare ingredients, and don't let the pictures and advertising on the bag lure you into a quick decision. Purchase foods from companies that have open communication channels with pet owners, allowing them to answer consumers' questions. Shop at smaller, boutique-type dog food stores (as they often sell brands whose mission statement is to provide healthful foods for pets).



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Beware of those vegetables dancing on the bags of supermarket foods, along with words like "natural." Healthy additives promoted by the big chains are most likely present in miniscule amounts, and processing destroys nearly all active ingredients in the food. Recognizing the telltale signs of marketing makes you a better consumer and—in turn—means a healthier choice for your dog.

Compare the first five ingredients on the bag and look for products that have whole foods listed, such as chicken, beef, salmon, venison, barley, rice. Buy products that use whole vegetables and grains. (Organic ingredients are even more beneficial.) The time spent reading labels and the higher price of better products are an opportunity for *investment*. Healthier foods are well worth the time and money as they increase overall health and longevity. Quality food equals quality life for you and your best friend. 🐾

