

# Ask A Vet: Your Dog is What He Eats

*Sunday, December 20, 2015*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

How do I decide what type of food to get my dog? There are so many varieties available, what are some basic guidelines I can use?

-Overwhelmed Reader

Dear Reader,

Choosing the right food for your dog is probably the most important thing you can do for him and it will have an effect on all aspects of health. This subject is far too complicated to cover in a short article, but I will hit on a few key points and some pitfalls to avoid. I often get asked simply what is the "best" dog food? I wish it was that easy, but the truth is every dog is different and therefore has different requirements and needs when it comes to nutrition.

First you have to consider what are your dog's caloric energy needs? Age and activity level are very important considerations. Puppies obviously have much higher caloric needs than adults pound per pound. Many foods are tailored to a specific life stage such as "senior" or "active adult". This can be helpful and is an easy place to start. Other factors might be lactation, illness, or specific activities like hunting or jogging. Neuter/Spay vs intact can also make a big difference in caloric needs.

Another major factor to consider besides calorie level is ingredient quality. This is where things can get tricky and often misleading. Terms like holistic, all natural, and organic get thrown around a lot and often don't mean anything. They might make us feel better about our purchase, but the truth is there are very few regulations regarding these marketing tactics. Reading food labels can get complicated, but remember that ingredients are listed in order of weight. Those at the top of the list comprise the majority of the food, so you should look for a quality meat source here. Also, remember the term bi-products does not necessarily mean lack of nutrition. It usually just refers to the things in animal products we sometimes waste like internal organs, which can actually be very good for your dog. Grains and glutes can also be controversial ingredients. Many people feel dogs have no benefit from them and they cause food allergies. Grains can actually be an important carbohydrate energy source. And while allergies to grains or gluten can exist, it is far more common for dogs to be allergic to whatever meat ingredients are in the food. My point being "grain free" is not all it's cracked up to be. Certain medical conditions such as kidney disease, food allergies, or urinary problems may require specific ingredients or nutrition levels. It is best to talk to your veterinarian about what foods may be best in this case.

Dog food cost is another important factor. You do not have to buy the most expensive food, but remember you do typically get what you pay for as far as ingredient quality. My advice is to get the highest quality food that fits your dog's lifestyle/age/special health requirements and still fits your budget. It's not always about feeding the best food, but rather feeding the best food for your specific dog. The good news is

there are more options than ever. If you have questions regarding what your dog's nutritional needs are, enlist the help of your veterinarian.

-Dr. Justin Sellon