

Ignore This Pet 'Gold Standard' – It Can Leave Your Pet Sickly

It may be the gold standard in this aspect of pet care. But at best, it's only a start. And at worst, if you follow it to a 'T,' it can mean you fall far short of optimal health for your precious pet. Here's what the doctor ordered, in addition to what they deem important.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Mainstream conventional advice on how to choose a good quality cat food barely scrapes the surface of what's really important when it comes to nourishing your cat
- Things like where the food is manufactured and whether it was formulated by a nutritionist are important, however, more important is whether the ingredients are excellent in quality and are biologically appropriate
- The best quality food you can offer your cat doesn't come in a can or a bag from the pet food store, but instead is a nutritionally balanced fresh food diet prepared in your own kitchen, with ingredients you hand-pick
- The great thing about a well-designed, homemade raw diet is you get to handpick the ingredients
- Making your own cat food can provide peace of mind because it's becoming increasingly difficult to find ethical pet food companies that use locally sourced or even U.S.-grown ingredients

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A post at PetMD titled "5 Ways to Know Your Cat Food is Worth the Money"¹ offered tips to consumers on what to look for in a commercial cat food to ensure the health of their pet. The article briefly touches on five general areas of concern with regard to cat food:

- Where the food is manufactured
- Who manufactures it
- Whether it contains additives, preservatives, or artificial flavors
- Whether it has undergone feeding trials
- Whether it contains an AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) nutritional statement

This is an acceptable place to start, but it's only a start. Whether your cat's diet is healthy for her (or worth your money) depends on a multitude of factors not mentioned in the article.

Where Your Cat's Food Is Manufactured Is Important, But

The general consensus of mainstream pet food experts is that formulas produced at a pet food company's own manufacturing facility are of better quality and safer than formulas produced at an offsite location, or by a third party.

An onsite production plant allows pet food companies to provide better quality control of ingredient sources and processes. PetMD advises consumers to look for the words "manufactured by" the pet food company on the label, rather than "manufactured for" or "distributed by."

Several small, ethical pet food companies produce outstanding products because they put their capital investments into excellent raw materials and not manufacturing equipment.

If you're feeding a food you simply love that has been co-packed or manufactured by someone else, it's important to get the back story of why the food is being made elsewhere. Usually the website or a phone call to the company can explain who is making their products and why.

It's important to note that the biologically inappropriate ingredients that go into most commercial cat foods are not affected by where the food is manufactured.

"Quality control" in this instance refers to measures taken to prevent contamination, mislabeling, and other production issues. It has nothing to do with the quality of the food in terms of its species-appropriateness.

So while it may be desirable to see "manufactured by" on a pet food label, the statement doesn't address whether or not the formula is highly nutritious for cats. The top 5 most profitable pet foods own all their own manufacturing equipment and use absolutely terrible quality raw materials that are not species-appropriate.

Who Formulates Your Cat's Food Is Important, But

Most major pet food producers employ animal nutritionists whose job it is to oversee and balance the ingredients that go into their formulas — a fact that is frequently touted by those who have an interest in promoting the biggest players in the industry.

However, what most pet guardians don't know is that the many veterinary nutritionists have financial ties to major pet food manufacturers.

Veterinary nutritionists receive a diploma from the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN). They are licensed vets who go on to become board certified in veterinary nutrition.

Once certified, they very often go to work for pet food companies. Major pet food manufacturers also frequently pay the tuition for DVMs studying to become veterinary nutritionists.

So when you hear or read that the XYZ pet food company has veterinary nutritionists on staff, keep in mind that many practicing veterinary nutritionists are obligated in some way to a pet food manufacturer.

Unfortunately, many small, family-owned, good quality pet food manufacturers can't afford to have a full-time veterinary nutritionist on staff, so they employ them on a consulting basis.

If you're buying your pet's food from a small, high-quality supplier, it should be easy enough to find out who their consultant is and his or her veterinary nutrition credentials.

Your Cat's Food Should Be Free of Additives, Preservatives, and Artificial Flavors, But

According to PetMD:

Premium pet foods use natural ingredients instead of artificial flavors, additives or preservatives that are often the source of "empty" or non-nutritious calories.

Some preservatives are even known to be carcinogenic (cancer-causing) in humans such as butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) and butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT).

Not only are additives, preservatives, and artificial flavors non-nutritious (and toxic), but so are most of the ingredients in processed cat food formulas.

Cats are **obligate carnivores** — meat eaters. Your kitty's body doesn't produce the enzymes necessary to digest grains, carbs or starches, yet those are the main ingredients in most big name commercial cat foods.

A biologically correct diet for a carnivore is high in moisture, high in protein, moderate in fat, and low in carbohydrates. The vast majority of pet foods on the market today are the opposite — low in moisture content, with low to moderate amounts of poor quality protein and fat, and high in starches or carbs.

So while it's certainly important to avoid cat food containing artificial flavors and colors, synthetic vitamins, and other additives and preservatives, it's equally important to feed a balanced, species-appropriate diet.

Cat Food Feeding Trials Are Important, But

Many mainstream pet food experts consider AAFCO feeding trials to be the gold standard in insuring that a new pet food formula provides proper nutrition. PetMD advises readers to look for a statement on their cat food label that reads, "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that [Name of Pet Food Company] provides complete and balanced nutrition."

While the U.S. has an organization that offers some rough nutritional parameters to sustain life (the AAFCO standards — remember many countries don't have any guidelines on the basic nutrients pets need to survive), using the agency's feeding trials as a stamp of approval for the quality of a particular type of pet food is unbelievably shortsighted.

The protocol for these tests is a 6-month feeding trial involving as few as 8 test subjects, and the goal is only to determine whether a formula can sustain life in test participants. Only 6 of the 8 animals need to finish the trial, and if weight and certain incredibly basic blood tests are normal, the food is deemed complete and balanced.

This is a frighteningly concerning "gold standard." Six pets still alive at the end of 6 months is insufficient proof that a pet food formula is biologically appropriate for a lifetime. These trials are not a good measure of a food's ability to cause nutritional deficiencies or overdoses over a longer period, nor can they demonstrate the food's impact on longevity, reproduction or multi-generational health.

Fortunately, cats (and dogs) are among the most resilient animals on the planet. They're able to survive when fed foods they were never designed to eat.

However, degeneration does occur as a result of inappropriate nutrition, but because the changes are gradual and often hidden until a disease is full-blown, we've been able to deceive ourselves into believing that processed pet foods are actually good for our animal companions.

But we've created dozens of generations of nutritionally compromised animals that suffer from degenerative diseases linked to nutritional deficiencies.

An AAFCO Statement of Nutritional Adequacy Is Important, But

AAFCO requires pet food manufacturers to include validation of the nutritional adequacy of their formulas before they can print a nutritional adequacy statement on the label. This means the food meets AAFCO's definition of complete and balanced nutrition in one or more life stages.

To provide validation of nutritional adequacy, pet food manufacturers can either prove by formulation that a product contains required levels of all essential nutrients deemed necessary by AAFCO, or they can use AAFCO-approved feeding trials. Both of these options have tremendous drawbacks. In fact, the Ancestral Diet should be the gold standard we strive to meet for nutritional requirements.

Problems can arise when pet food manufacturers choose not to formulate products using AAFCO's minimum nutrient standards, or when humans try to guess at what constitutes an Ancestral Diet, or even take a stab at trying to meet the meek minimums set forth by AAFCO (whose nutrient requirements are far less than the Ancestral Diet) when preparing a homemade diet.

Veterinarians are the folks that see nutritional imbalances expressed as chronic disease manifestations, something that's consistent with the majority of processed diets formulated by AAFCO standards and poorly designed homemade diets.

AAFCO provides the most rudimentary nutritional guidelines that are a basic foundation upon which to build. These guidelines are deficient, but if they are totally disregarded, it's very easy to cause entirely avoidable, grossly obvious nutritional health issues in pets, such as secondary nutritional hyperparathyroidism (metabolic bone disease), among others.

Because following the Ancestral Diet nutritional parameters provides almost double the nutrients of current AAFCO recommendations (in many instances), and as much nutrition from whole foods (versus supplements) as economically possible, aiming to feed your pets an ancestrally balanced diet is the goal.

That said, in a perfect world it would be great to see AAFCO switch to optimal nutrient requirements as outlined by the Ancestral Diet database rather than archaic "minimums" and occasional "maximums," determined by researchers and manufacturers in the last 50 years.

Additionally, factoring in nutrient loss from soil depletion, CAFOs (animals raised in stressful, artificial and often inhumane environments) and the glyphosate load in food and its impact on digestibility and absorbability into their recommendations as well.

The Recommended Cat Food — A Nutritionally Balanced Raw Homemade Diet

This is the best diet you can feed your cat. However, it's very important not to wing it when preparing your pet's meals at home. When pet food nutrition expert Steve Brown analyzed many of the homemade and prey model diets available, they fall far short in trace minerals, antioxidants including nutrients like manganese, magnesium, vitamin E and D, copper, zinc, iron, choline, and essential fatty acids.

Additionally, if the diet doesn't have a proper fat or calcium to phosphorus balance, it can actually cause a myriad of health problems, especially in growing animals. So, it's critically important that you know your homemade diet is balanced, preferably to the Ancestral guidelines. Sadly, we find most homemade diets don't meet the dismal AAFCO guidelines, much less the Ancestral Diet parameters.

The great thing about a well-designed, homemade raw diet is you get to handpick the ingredients. Making your own cat food can provide peace of mind because it's becoming increasingly difficult to find ethical pet food companies that use locally sourced or even U.S.-grown ingredients.

With homemade food (fed gently cooked, warmed or raw), you're in complete control of every ingredient that enters your pet's body. Fresh, unadulterated food contains all the enzymes and phytonutrients that are typically destroyed during intense food processing that is designed to create food products that are shelf-stable for months to years.

Making small, fresh batches of real food for your pets is the best way to ensure you are delivering the maximum level of species-appropriate nutrition to the animals in your care.

Sources and References

¹ [PetMD \(Archived\)](#).
