

## Should your pet's diet go 'natural?'

By Kathleen Doheny for WebVet



As you scan the choices in your market's pet food aisle, you've no doubt noticed the labels promoting "natural" foods for dogs and cats. Natural pet foods are popular, according to a survey of 1,090 respondents conducted by Hill's Pet Nutrition, which makes Hill's Nature's Best, a natural product. But the pollsters also found confusion about what the term means. To

complicate your shopping and feeding tasks, veterinarians don't all agree that pets need "natural" formulas.

First, the survey findings:

- A third of respondents say they feed their pet a natural food, the majority for health reasons, and about half choose the natural food based on ingredients.
- More than half of respondents believe natural pet food is the best option for their pet's health.
- More than half say they **read the label** (<http://www.webvet.com/main/article?id=1582>) before buying a pet food, but understanding the label or all of it is difficult for most who do.

The survey answers trigger several other important questions, such as what constitutes a "natural" pet food and whether it beats out other types.

### What is a natural pet food?

Guidelines for natural pet foods are made by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), says Kurt Gallagher, a spokesperson for the Pet Food Institute in Washington, D.C. Among other requirements, the use of the term natural in reference to the food product as a whole is acceptable only when all of the ingredients meet the definition. Natural means none of the ingredients are chemically synthesized.

The association does, however, make an exception when chemically synthesized vitamins, minerals or other trace nutrients are present in an otherwise natural food product if a disclaimer is used that these parts of the food aren't natural. In this case, the label would probably say: "Natural with added vitamins and minerals."

If only some of the ingredients are natural, look for such labels as "natural cheese flavor."

### Is natural food a necessity? Three views

There's no official policy or advice about natural pet food from the American Veterinary Medical Association, according to spokesperson David Kirkpatrick. Individual vets do have their opinions, however.

"Natural" means different things to different pet owners, finds Tony Buffington, DVM, PhD, professor of veterinary clinical sciences at the Ohio State University Veterinary Hospital, Columbus, and diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Nutrition. "If they mean raw food, I want to see the recipe," he says. If pet owners are asking about feeding their pets a diet labeled as natural from a commercial manufacturer that has years of experience making pet foods, he says: "Have at it."

But he adds a caveat: Don't expect health miracles just because your pet is eating "natural" foods. "Natural pet foods are just another kind of pet food made available for people who are interested in those kinds of food," he says. "There's no evidence I am aware of [that] they are any different from the point of view of the health of the animals or that they are any worse."

However, Heidi Hulon, DVM, a consultant for Hill's Pet Nutrition and a small animal practitioner in Louisville, Ky., sees benefit to natural foods—assuming the food lives up to its label claims as natural.

If so, she says, "it provides complete and balanced nutrition, and it helps maintain ideal body weight when fed appropriately." Some kinds of natural foods include high levels of antioxidants, which help maintain cellular health, she says, by protecting cells from damage done by unstable molecules known as free radicals.

In a nutshell: "The natural products are good, provided you know who the manufacturer is and they can confirm that the food follows the AAFCO guidelines," Hulon says.

**Credit:** Revisited by Susan E. Aiello, DVM, ELS, and John A. Bukowski, DVM, MPH, PhD