

# What can you glean from a pet food label?

A pet food label is a good place to start when choosing what food to feed your pet but the label can prove somewhat confusing. **Nicole Paley**, Communications Manager at the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, sheds some light

Certain terms on a pet food label are particularly baffling but that doesn't mean pet food manufacturers are trying to deliberately confuse or hide something. The information is actually displayed that way because the law requires it to be.

When it comes to labelling, pet food falls under animal feed legislation and not human food. Terms that make no sense to the average consumer will make great sense to your local farmer.

Take, for instance, 'Crude ash' (also known as 'incinerated residue' or 'inorganic matter'). Crude ash is an important indicator of the mineral content of a pet food and includes nutrients such as calcium, phosphorus, sodium or magnesium.

The law requires that the label contains certain key pieces of information, including a list of ingredients (referred to on the label as 'composition'), additives and a nutrition analysis (referred

to as 'analytical constituents') along with feeding guidelines.

## INGREDIENTS LIST

The ingredients list is the first port of call for most owners wanting to know more about the nutrition in their pet's food. What you need to know about the ingredients list is:

- Ingredients listed are in descending order by weight.



- They can be listed by their specific name (eg chicken meat meal) or category names (eg meat and animal derivatives). With category descriptions, all the ingredients are not listed but the category is.

- If a product name draws special attention to certain ingredients, then the percentages of these ingredients must be declared.

The ingredients list is only

part of the story and it needs to be cross-referenced with the 'analytical constituents' which shows the main nutrients in the cat food as percentage figures and will include protein (crude protein), fat content (crude oils or fat), crude fibre and crude ash (mineral content).

The main ingredients in pet food:

- Protein sources come in many forms; they can be ani-

mal-based like chicken, beef and fish, or they can be plant-based proteins such as grains and vegetables.

- The meat-based ingredients will be listed as meat and animal derivatives or by their own individual name.

The pet food industry uses by-products from the human food chain and by law

must only come from animals that have passed veterinary inspections as fit for human consumption.

- Cereals such as corn (maize), rice, wheat, barley or sorghum, provide an important source of energy, a proportion of protein and other nutrients, including thiamine and niacin. Certain fibres like moderately fermentable fibres such as beet pulp or rice bran can also have additional beneficial effects on the health of the digestive tract.

Other ingredients you may see on the label and want to know more about:

- Additives per kg: which can be used in pet foods include vitamins, flavours, preservatives, antioxidants and colours. Most of the additives used in pet food are also used in our foods.

- Sodium and chloride: Sodium is an essential nutrient for cats and dogs along with chloride and is important for fluid balance in the

**"Brand websites offer plenty of information too"**

body. Good sources of sodium in cat food include meat, poultry, fish and eggs.

Sodium may also be included in prepared pet foods in the form of table salt (sometimes listed on the ingredients panel as salt) to enhance taste. There are guidelines on sodium levels for cats and the levels used in pet foods.

- 'Various sugars' is a category description, which may refer to sucrose (cane sugar, commonly known as table sugar), fructose and glucose, all of which are natural products present in fruit, vegetables and cereals. Sugar may be added to cat foods as an energy source. Cats can easily convert sugar in to usable energy through normal digestion.

Very small amounts of sugar may be added to assist with the cooking process.

If sugar is included in addition to that which naturally occurs in the ingredients, levels are carefully controlled to ensure nutritional balance and palatability.

Reference:  
1 National Research Council (NRC)

## WHAT ELSE WILL THE LABEL TELL YOU?

### Direction and description – these must state:

- whether the product is complete or complementary – complete means it provides all the nutrients a pet needs in a meal, while complementary foods are designed to be fed alongside something else
- the species for which the product is intended
- directions for use/feeding instructions

### 'Best before' date

This date indicates the minimum storage life of the product. The month and year must be shown.

### Have a question?

Many pet food companies have customer care lines to answer any questions. Brand websites offer plenty of information too. Contact details are on the label. For a guide on reading pet food labels, visit: [www.pfma.org.uk](http://www.pfma.org.uk)