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Alternatively Speaking: Are All Grain-Free Diets Created Equal? Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

My mother recently got a kitten. To be honest, he was an orphan brought into our hospital who nearly froze to death last winter. My staff named him Yeti. After getting him back into good health, my daughter convinced Grandma to take the kitten so he could remain in the family. So when we brought him to his new home, we made a trip to the store to help her pick out some ‘good’ food. This should have been easy because we specifically wanted a grain-free diet for our little carnivore. I don’t visit the big pet stores often, and this was an eye-opening experience. There was aisle after aisle of shiny pet food bags and cans all looking and claiming to be the best and too many to count that were grain-free. An hour later we left with a bunch of cans and a pounding headache from reading all those fine print labels, along with a much clearer understanding of why our clients want to talk about how to know what really ‘good food’ is.

For the majority of people, just like with our own families, we know that eating well is the foundation for health and therefore it is also an important part of our pet’s health care. As pet owners we want to feel good about what we feed them. But feeding pets is a multi-million dollar industry, and companies have to attract the consumer’s eye and say something on their bag that seemingly sets them apart from the sea of competition while meeting what they think the consumer is looking for. In today’s market, one such niche is to sell ‘grain-free’ food. Originally a high end specialty product, grain-free foods today are becoming as common as the special protein foods like lamb and venison, which 10 years ago were never seen on our grocery shelves.

So what does it mean to be “grain-free” and why did grain-free food become the latest rage? It stems from a very solid premise that dogs and cats are biologically designed to eat meats and not the carbohydrates and grains that have historically been a major protein source in dry pet foods. Processed grains, like corn and wheat, were identified as being stressful to the digestive tracts, immune systems, and overall health of our pets in ways that parallel their affects in people. When changing the diet became the first step in so many holistic medical plans for pets, people started taking a harder look at what they were feeding them. Home cooking and raw diets were excellent options to combat this issue, but as a matter of convenience and economics, the use of dry foods remained the first choice of pet owners and as such the demand for better dry food increased. New and smaller pet food companies met this rising nutritional goal in several ways. Some focused on raw feeding, dehydrated, and freeze dried meals. Others created technology to be able to make a low carb, high meat kibble that kept its shape. Between the cost of higher meat content and the processing technology, the choices were few and expensive.

Larger pet food companies also saw the demand and found that they could keep costs down by placing meats higher on the labels than grains and advertised them as having meat as the ‘first ingredient’. In many cases, the use of grain continued as much as before. It was divided into many smaller amounts of grain meals, grain glutes, and all the other forms of grain that were often listed numerously, but less obviously, and lower on the ingredient list. Combined with some smart advertising on the front of the bag, most consumers thought this was an upgrade and the strategy worked for a while. But as consumers became educated label-readers, and raw and low-carbohydrate dry diets gained popularity, the bar was raised. In order to remain appealing, the focus was turned away from carbohydrates in general and just on grains. This way grains could be traded for other starches such as rice and potatoes to start, now lentils, chick peas, peas, sweet potatoes, and even canola meal. The list gets longer

every day. In doing so, companies were able to maintain an inexpensive food source while still competing as a grain-free food. But are all these diets really better than the grains we were trying to avoid in the first place?

Conditionally, I would say “yes”. If we revisit our original goal of feeding our pets more meat and less processed carbohydrates, then we do have a wider variety of diets that do better than they used to. The trick is to remember that the front of a bag of pet food is advertising, and the buyer needs to beware. The term “grain-free food” covers an enormous range including frozen raw, super low carb/high meat content foods, as well as diets that can contain up to 60% carbohydrates. If you are feeding a grain-free food to avoid a wheat allergy, then simply not having wheat in the food will achieve your goal. If you are looking to provide a less glycemic meal for your pet, then knowing if your diet has 20% or 50% processed starches becomes a big deal if that is all your pet is eating. That knowledge then needs to be taken into consideration in the formation of your overall feeding plan. Unfortunately, carb content is not listed on the nutrition label and manufacturer claims on the front of the bag can be worded very misleadingly. A quick way to compare foods is to add up the percentages for protein, fat, and moisture (not fiber) listed on the food. This total subtracted from 100% roughly estimates the carbohydrate content. Paired with reading the list other ingredients that are in the food, you can tell if the diet meets the goals you and your veterinarian have outlined for your pet’s health.

So how do you choose? Balancing health ideals with budget and lifestyle is a reality we all face. But while eating well does have a price tag, it does not have to be crippling and should save you in health care costs in the long run. The key is to first identify your pet’s needs with your veterinarian. Holistic approaches evaluate the patient’s strengths and weaknesses, and diet certainly can be used to strengthen and not aggravate those baseline tendencies that every individual has. If dry food is going to be part of your pet’s diet, then read the label, know the carbohydrate content, and use other less processed foods as needed to keep the carbs to a minimum. Cats are more sensitive to meat and water content in their food than dogs, but overall how much processed food and carbohydrates are right for any pet is an individual assessment. Each pet’s ability to handle processed food, even one high in meat, varies. In the end, after you’ve come up with a plan on paper then let your pet be the judge. Grass eating, passing gas, and stools that end soft are all signs that your pet is not processing its diet well and you should have a conversation with your veterinarian before braving the pet food aisle to hunt for the next ‘good food’.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseanimalhospital.com

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