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Alternatively Speaking: Grain Free Diets – Friend or Foe?
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The choice of what to feed dogs has always been a challenge, especially for those trying to use nutrition to promote health. The variety of pet food brands grows all the time with store shelves lined with flashy packaging, all saying they are better than the bag next to it. Even in our office we are looking up new pet foods on a daily basis. The advent of grain-free (GF) diets has further complicated the choice especially with recent fears about nutritional links to heart disease in dogs, so it is no wonder that many shoppers feel uncertain in making food decisions for their furry family members. What is best is not an easy question to answer since the perfect ingredients or food type varies from dog to dog. We will try to tackle this universal issue in this first part of a two part series. First we will look at the history of dry foods for dogs, and how to read labels to know what you are buying. In the next edition, we will look at how to balance dry foods with fresh to minimize the effects of processed foods, and how to tell if what you are feeding is the ‘best’ for your dog.

Let’s begin with how we got so many food choices to begin with. Years ago there were a handful of dry foods to pick from at the store. But as reliance on dry foods increased, pets ate less fresh meats and prey on the farm and inflammatory issues associated with processed diets started to be linked to medical issues. At first, new dry foods appeared in the veterinary office with special ingredients for allergies and digestive problems - lamb and rice! Changing ingredients really helped many pets, so these foods were popular and pet food companies quickly started using similar ingredients. As a result, after a few decades we have run out of ‘new’ proteins to use medically and vets use hydrolyzed (pre-digested) diets for patients, while stores have foods with bison and trout and just about everything imaginable.

However using novel ingredients was not a cure for many pets, and the starch content in dry foods became suspect. Raw and dehydrated foods were not new but were starting to grow in popularity due to their lack of processed starches. Other small companies had a similar intent, to mimic a dog’s natural diet but wanted to keep the convenience of dry food. It is hard to make a cookie without a flour binder, but they developed an all-meat dry dog food, and ‘grain free’ (GF) dog food was born. Right or wrong, this feeding philosophy resonated with consumers and suddenly grains became taboo. Dog food makers scrambled to create their own GF diets and in some cases, bought up the original smaller companies to eliminate the competition. But to make GF food profitable in grocery aisles, they had to minimize the meat content and suddenly potatoes and all kinds of beans became a staple in dog food with the GF label.

This shift in ingredients was not based on any nutritional wisdom to improve pet health, it was to preserve the bottom line. Now my goal is not to demonize the pet food industry. I have no doubt that diet formulators from the start thought we could achieve convenience and good nutritional using more profitable ingredients, just like we have done with production animals that eat corn instead of grass. Some still think that is true. But holistic opinion, supported by science and what we see in our medical offices, disagrees. Processing food alters its physical structure and nutrient content, and changes how available it is to the body compared to fresh foods. Changing to atypical ingredients and processing them adds another layer of unpredictability. While Mother Nature may have things all figured out, we are still novices in understanding the intricacies of nutrition and how some foods enhance or interfere with digestion and absorption of nutrients.

This has never been more evident since this February when the FDA issued a warning that GF diets may be involved in some cases of heart disease in dogs. We now know that the role of diet is less certain (see the links below for details) and the FDA’s most recent statement this July said this was a “complex scientific issue that may involve multiple factors”. Using beans in dog food is relatively new and studies are ongoing to tell if anything in GF diets can impact heart health, it may not. But we do know that certain breeds can struggle to make or get taurine,

cysteine and methionine from their food, so it is possible that diets foreign to a dog's natural menu may impact these nutrients and affect dogs with genetic risk for heart disease. Inflammation also plays a role in heart disease, and diet clearly impacts all of these factors. While we wait for answers, if you have a breed prone to heart disease, talk to your veterinarian about screening tests or nutritional supplementation no matter what food they are eating.

So here we are back in the store, trying to pick a pet food. Many dogs do see a benefit from avoiding certain grains or meats, but you may want a diet with rice or potatoes and limited beans. So step one is to read the ingredient panel so you know what you are feeding. Remember, the bag is all advertising, and labeling rules allow them to say misleading things. For instance, you see fresh veggies, but on the list there is more sugar than carrots. Or the name says "turkey and sweet potato" but the ingredient list has chicken, beef and fish too. Remember to read the whole list! Companies know that if the first ingredients are meat, they can often get away with less desirable things lower on the list. In GF diets, look for multiple beans like chickpeas, lentils, or peas, which when added up could mean the bag is half beans. Ideally limit one bean and potato in the top 8 ingredients, and look for multiples such as pea fiber, pea meal, peas, and dried peas. Each of those will be lower down on the list but together make peas a top ingredient. As for the panel that shows percent of protein, fats etc. these values tend to stay within set standards, and only a special medical diet would be dramatically different. We used to gauge the meat vs carbohydrate content of foods by adding up the fat, protein and moisture on the label – the remainder is carbs. But with GF foods, beans have protein too so they may be replacing meat content more than a grain would. Lastly, and more important for canned and raw foods, make sure the label says the diet is complete and meets AAFCO standards, and that it is appropriate for the breed and age of dog you are feeding.

If you still need help deciding what is best for your dog, talking to your veterinarian is a good place to start. In our practice dietary goals are based on your dog's constitution, which dictates what foods may be most helpful to keep him or her healthy. We will always try to include some fresh feeding, but dry foods are here to stay and are a good match for many dogs as part of their meal plan. Unfortunately we can't help with the number of bags of food you will have to choose from, but armed with a little information hopefully you can now tell that you are getting what you intended to, and will have more time to go outside and play with your pup rather than be paralyzed in the pet food aisle!

<https://www.hemopet.org/fda-updates-heart-disease-dogs/>

<https://www.hemopet.org/dcm-heart-disease-dogs-exotic-ingredients/>

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she and her associates practice conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseaanimalhospital.com.