

Would you feed it to a dog (or cat or ferret)



Part 2 of 3 by Phil Tripp

In our last issue, we had started an article that was to be a two part series on what's in your pet's food, looking at various brands, their nutritional claims, actual contents and demythologising some of the hype and marketing spin that are used to define 'premium', 'super-premium', 'ultra-premium', 'organic', 'holistic' and other names pet foods are called. It wasn't meant to be scandalous or even controversial, and in the end it wasn't.

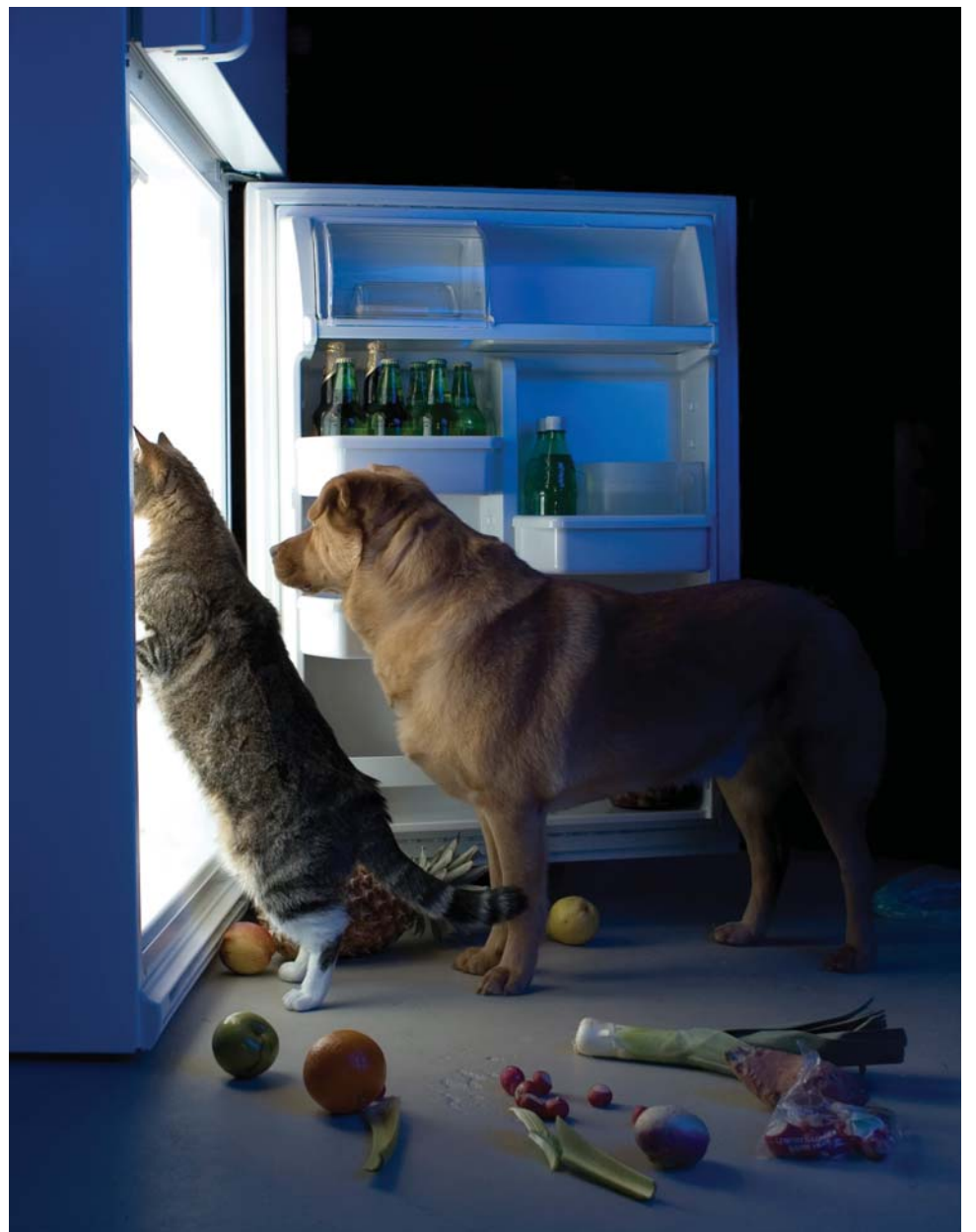
Readers had asked us from our first issue how to decide on what to feed pets for optimum health, and whether premium foods—dry or canned—were worth the extra cost or whether fresh and chilled or frozen products were better. We thought we could answer this in two issues and we made a call out to pet food manufacturers to send us their products, product ingredient information, nutritional claims with our being able to reserve the right to test them in an independent manner.

But things have changed radically since January when we initiated this project. First, we encountered objections from some of the larger multinational brands as to our purpose and methodology. Fair enough, and we explained ourselves. To their credit, Supercoat, Purina, Nutrience, Nutro and some smaller brands happily sent samples and allowed us to test them. Other brands either never responded or refused for a variety of reasons.

We gave them another chance to submit product and extended the deadline to April 1 to allow for new formulations, new packaging, new products or whatever reasons they might have had not to submit. We found that nothing really had changed. Except of course, the news overseas.

We hate to say we told you so. But recent events in the areas of pet food and treats have reinforced our columns and articles over the past couple of years on harmful ingredients and bacterial infection in commercial products. More than 60 million containers of over 90 brands of pet food were recalled in North America from mid-March which includes canned and pouched foods—50 for dogs and over 40 for cats. This was followed by dozens of pet treats infected with salmonella.

The cause of the contamination from manufacturer Menu Foods of Canada was initially believed to be wheat gluten that either picked up rat poison from treated fields or aflatoxin from aspergillus mould. The death toll due primarily to kidney failure was initially reported at only 16 animals, but this was quickly revealed to be just the number of test animals at Menu that died. Within a few weeks, more than 300 deaths had been confirmed and the toll continues rising once reports are in from vets across the US, Canada and other countries where the foods were exported.



Less than a month after the largest pet food recall in history, more than 12,000 complaints from pet owners were logged by the US Food and Drug Administration and one credible website, petconnection.com, claimed it had documented close to 3000 deaths. Menu prepared itself for a barrage of lawsuits, pet food brands took out full page ads in over 60 major metro newspapers and their websites filled with disclaimers and recall notices.

Menu Foods manufactured home brand types of food for supermarkets and department stores like Wal Mart, but also made products for Iams, Eukanuba, Purina, Hills Science Diet and Nutro as premium products among other more commercial brands. Those five brands withdrew potentially contaminated foods in overseas markets as precautions, but Australian consumers were assured that these products had not been imported here.

But then, another subsequent recall which was a result of contaminated wheat gluten—used as a protein source and filler in some foods—from a Chinese supplier, resulted in the first Australian recall from Hills, for a cat prescriptive product. The contaminant was identified as melamine, a chemical used in plastics manufacture and fertiliser. The only Hills product recalled here was Prescription Diet m/d Feline Dry Food, again as a responsible precaution by the company, not because any contamination had been documented. It was just because the possibility existed due to Menu using the Chinese supplier and to be safe.

What's really in that can of pet food?

Here's a guide to some ingredients listed on the label and what they really are, according to the Association of American Feed Control Officials (which has the generally accepted standards of ingredients):

Chicken, beef or fish: clean flesh from these animals.

Meat byproducts: blood, bone and organs such as lungs, spleen, kidney, brains, liver, stomachs and intestines from slaughterhouses.

Poultry byproducts: necks, feet, undeveloped eggs, lungs, intestines. Not feathers.

Meat or poultry by product meal: blood, bone and organs that are rendered, dried and ground up. Can include tissue from animals that died outside slaughterhouses.

Steamed bone meal: bones separated through cooking and ground up. It provides minerals, mainly calcium and phosphorus.

Taurine: an amino acid needed by cats.

Grains: labeled either as whole grains, such as corn or barley, or as ground milled products, which are what's left after flour and cereal are processed.

Vegetables: dried yams, beet pulp, carrots.

Additives: vitamins and minerals, flavorings and preservatives.



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The hit list in the US rolled on as the media filled with accounts of more recalls. In early April, 19 brands of dog biscuits in the US were pulled from the market due to the same melamine contamination. In the same week, over 30 brands of puppy and dog chews were recalled for salmonella contamination which could also cross over to humans handling the treats. Then, cat and ferret treats were also recalled for salmonella.

It came only a year after another massive recall occurred in the US when Diamond Pet Foods recalled 20 varieties of dog and cat food made at one plant after at least 100 dogs died after eating food contaminated with aflatoxin, which comes from a fungus that develops on corn, peanuts and other crops. None of that product was exported to Australia. But concerns here that imported pet foods and locally made products from overseas ingredients have caused panic and an overflow of phone inquiries to the call centres of major brands.

Media stories can cause over-reaction and this was the case in 2006 when it was reported that some makes of chilled meat products contained dangerous levels of sulfur dioxide as a preservative that was causing pet deaths. The truth is that most pet meats either used it or other preservatives, but it also caused manufacturers to change formulations in reaction to the news.

While the recalls have not only raised safety concerns, they've also pointed out that many big name premium brands contain some of the same ingredients as bargain labels. But on a positive note, it's not only educated consumers despite the panic, it's also confirmed pet food manufacturers policies and procedures are swiftly reactive to a crisis. And it's also made them even more vigilant in their ingredients, compounding and making of pet food as well as tracking shipments overseas and here.

It's encouraged pet owners to explore organic and holistic pet foods, make their own and check labels more. And for those brands that have proven organic ingredients and failsafe formulations, it's been a bonanza for sales. Meanwhile, some pet owners have turned to making their own foods which can be just as daunting and dangerous as feeding the wrong product.

"Most of us humans aren't that good at feeding ourselves... and pets are suffering the same symptoms of overweight and malnutrition as we are!"

The best source of advice initially is the pet's veterinarian. While some vets sell specific brands of foods at their practices, they are also the first point of contact for understanding your pet's nutritional needs based on its breed, age, gender and other factors. Vets do not recommend that people attempt to prepare home-cooked meals for their pets because pet nutrition is very complicated and unique to species and individual animals. If you are certain you wish to cook for your pet, first consult with your veterinarian and do some research on appropriate diets for your pet. A pet owner should only consider recipes for pet food that are developed for dogs or cats by veterinarians or trained professionals in animal nutrition.

Unless properly formulated by a nutritionist, diets made at home are not likely to be nutritionally complete and balanced. The nutritional profile of any diet—including homemade diets—depends on how the recipe was formulated, the nutrient content of the ingredients, and how the owner prepares the diet. Homemade diets may also contain contaminants and food-borne microbes if the owner is not as careful as he or she is about his or her own foods.

All major pet food brands adhere to nutrition standards developed by the Association of American Feed Control Officials, as well as through feeding trials done by the companies. Despite the recent media frenzy, most pet food brands are totally safe and nutritious. There are foods in every category and at every price that will meet pets' needs, based on the animal, its history and its owner.

Then there's the question of dry vs wet foods. While the reasoning is that dry food tends to reduce dental tartar, if fed dry, most should be moistened. Wet foods are considered by some to be better for animal at risk of kidney stones or urinary tract disease, but in dogs, canned foods tend to increase food intake and increase obesity. However the truth is that too many animals do not drink enough water and too few are given diets that are diverse with fresh meats, vegetables, whole grains or even fruits, which can be beneficial as part of a balanced diet.

The needs of a neutered, sedentary adult dog is radically different from an intact, working dog or puppy and dietary needs change as the animal get older or changes circumstance, exercise routines and health. Let's face it, most of us humans are not that good at feeding ourselves or our children and pets are suffering the same symptoms of overweight and malnutrition as we are! One of the down sides of the recent recalls is that not only are some pet owners radically changing their pets' diets in reaction to this, they could be just as seriously damaging them nutritionally.

All pet food is an attempt to reverse-engineer animals' natural diet into something that works both for them and their owners. Cats and dogs didn't evolve to eat from cans and bags. Neither did humans. It just became a matter of convenience and schedules rather than nutritional needs and intelligent research.

So that's what we're advocating here—not to give up on commercial pet foods but to take this opportunity to educate yourself on what is best for your pet at their age and activity level. Don't fall into the trap that you can instantly change a diet and balance it as well as keep it interesting and still not break the budget.

Next issue, we'll finish this two part article, which has extended to three parts, with a comparison chart of pet foods on the market locally as to contents, nutritional analysis and other handy information.



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