

And as a final note, some ingredients can cause allergies to pets, especially grain products. And there is another hidden danger in grain products which can harbour a mould called Aspergillus (found in corn, wheat, rice, soybeans and especially peanuts being ground dwellers) which produces a poison called Aflatoxin. The mould is frequently found in crops that are exposed to high humidity or that have been damaged by drought with the resulting toxin producing cirrhosis and carcinoma of the liver, acute liver damage and digestion problems.

First discovered in 1960, present in peanut meal which was blamed for the death of 100,000 turkeys in the UK, it was at the centre of the massive 2006 recall of a variety of pet foods manufactured by Diamond in the US due to contaminated corn.

Another problem with peanuts for protein and the use of peanut hulls as a bulk fiber ingredient in diet formulations is the potential cross allergic reaction of humans that are sensitive to the legume. For example, a child allergic to nuts that eats or makes contact with pet food that has peanuts or peanut hulls can have a severe if not fatal reaction. It's estimated that 1 in about 110 children have developed some level of nut allergy.

OK, actual ingredients out of the way, let's look at how an ordinary dog food can be labeled in ways that either disguise the contents or use marketing spin to make consumers believe that it is a higher quality product with a happy dog on the package. Oddly enough, as we were preparing this article, a neighbour, who is a journalist, handed us a package of the food he was feeding his dog this week and, because he's read our previous articles, asked us how good it was.

It's Lucky Dog Adult, a budget brand with bright red packaging and attractive multi-coloured kibbles on the front with a smiling dog looking imploringly at you with a begging dog on the back. It's made by Purina to a formula and price for a consumer that is probably more cost conscious than nutritionally aware. In their defence, Purina also makes high quality and premium foods as you will see below with excellent ingredients at a high price. In this case, you get what you pay for.

On the front in the largest print, it says "Minced Beef, Vegetable and Marrowbone Flavour". And it says it again in another smaller panel. And again on the side of the package under the actual ingredients. At the top front it says "Made with real meat".... 23 vitamins and minerals... 100% complete and balanced nutrition". It also says "Pet Food Only" which is the most truthful statement as it turns out. As you'll see below by the boxed food label rules, this food takes some poetic license with ingredients, that is totally permitted under the law.



So those three main supposed products—Minced Beef, Vegetable and Marrowbone are flavours, not main ingredients—such a small amount that as you will see in the 'real' ingredients list are actually a lesser amount than either food colours or preservatives.

Here's the ingredient list:

Cereals and brans (no mention of what types or what parts, whether whole, bleached, powdered or what percentage), meat and meat by-products (again no percentage and by lumping the two together, it appears that is 'Real Meat' but of course, it doesn't define what parts or what age) but it does say derived from beef and/or mutton (the and/or part means could be one, both or maybe the other but you can rest assured it's not lamb). Then tallow derived from beef and/or mutton. That's it for major food groups.

Pet Food Label "Rules"

In order to have some truth in labeling, the following descriptions are the general rules of the pet food industry associations.

The 95% Rule: If the product says "Salmon Cat Food" or "Beef Dog Food," 95% of the product must be the named ingredients. A product with a combination label, such as "Beef and Liver for Dogs," must contain 95% beef and liver, and there must be more beef than liver, since beef is named first.

The 25% or "Dinner" Rule: Ingredients named on the label must comprise at least 25% of the product but less than 95%, when there is a qualifying "descriptor" term like "dinner," "entree," "formula," "platter," "nuggets," etc. In "Beef Dinner for Dogs," beef may or may not be the primary ingredient. If two ingredients are named ("Beef and Turkey Dinner for Dogs"), the two ingredients must total 25%, there must be more of the first ingredient (beef) than the second (turkey), and there must be at least 3% of the lesser ingredient.

The 3% or "With" Rule: A product may be labeled "Cat Food with Salmon" if it contains at least 3% of the named ingredient.

The "Flavour" Rule: A food may be labeled "Turkey Flavour Cat Food" even if the food does not contain such ingredients, as long as there is a "sufficiently detectable" amount of flavor. This may be derived from meals, by-products, or "digests" of various parts from the animal species indicated on the label.

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The remaining ingredients in order are salt, vitamins, minerals and essential amino acids, food colours, preservatives and (wait for it) natural flavours. The nutritional analysis is 16% Crude Protein, 10% Crude Fat and 2.7% Crude Fiber with 1% salt. Not a great count, but the one thing they don't have to tell you is that it is about 70% carbohydrate by my math.

And as the package points out, "Made with real meat providing protein for strong muscles...", "delicious and 100% nutritionally balanced (for all dogs?) from 18 months to 7-10 years". "With the goodness of real meat and vegetables..." I think we can stop the analysis here. And if I may conclude, why do we have food colours? Dogs don't buy on colours. People do!

OK, now that we're past all the science of pet foods, let's have a look at an array of more premium dry food products that have clearly labeled ingredients. I'm going to eliminate the vitamins, minerals, additives and supplements in the interest of brevity but you can probably find all of this information on the websites of pet food companies as well as on the package.

But for the purpose of brevity in this already long article, we'll deal with the most used pet food, dry kibbles and we'll limit it to dog food to use examples of ingredients without going into heavy science. What we did was take a range of food brands and compare two formulations—Senior or Older dog and an Overweight/Obese or restricted diet formula. We are looking at the primary ingredients—usually the first six to ten, and not listing the added vitamins, minerals, extracts or other supplements which are often inserted into or sprayed on the mixture after heating to make up for lost nutrients due to cooking.

For example, cooked foods lose most Omega 3 oil components and many heat sensitive vitamins and minerals. Which is why you'll see the following ingredient mix after the key ingredients of meats, grains and vegetables. They are additives to make up for lost nutrients or to enhance the product with compounds that may add nutritional value (as taken from one random brand)

"Rosemary Extract, Choline Chloride, Potassium Chloride, Dried Kelp, Glucosamine Hydrochloride, Sodium Chloride, Parsley Flakes, Calcium Carbonate, Zinc Protein, Ferrous Sulfate, Zinc Sulfate, Vitamin E Supplement, Vitamin B-12 Supplements, Ascorbic Acid (vitamin C), Taurine, Yucca Schidigera Extract, L-Lysine, Manganese Sulfate, Niacin, Riboflavin Supplement (Vitamin B-2), Copper Protein, Copper Sulfate, d-Calcium Pantothenate, Vitamin A Acetate, Inositol, Folic Acid (Vitamin B-9), Pyridoxine Hydrochloride (Vitamin B-6), Thiamin Mononitrate (Vitamin B-1), D-Activated Animal Sterol (source of Vitamin D-3), Biotin, Ethylene Diamine Dihydriodide (source of Iodine), Cobalt Sulfate, Vitamin K1 Supplement, Sodium Selenite"

In no particular order and with no recommendations, here are the primary ingredients in a broad range of pet foods. Remember the ingredients are listed in descending order from the most by weight to the least.

HILLS SCIENCE DIET Senior 7

Ground Whole Grain Corn, Chicken By-Product Meal, Pork, Soybean Mill Run, Flaxseed, Chicken Liver Flavor, Corn Gluten Meal, Dried Egg Product... then about 40 other ingredients starting with Pottasium Chloride and ending with Rosemary Extract.

HILLS SCIENCE DIET Canine r/d* For the Nutritional Management of Obese or Overweight Dogs.

Corn meal, peanut hulls 28.2%, chicken by-product meal, soybean meal, soybean mill run, chicken liver flavor, dried egg product, vegetable oil... and a list of 26 ingredients starting with taurine and ending with vitamin B-12 supplement.

(Writer's note. This is the only food we found in random checks with peanut hulls clearly listed)

EUKANUBA Adult Light Formula

Corn Meal, Chicken, Chicken By-Product Meal, Ground Whole Grain Sorghum, Fish Meal (source of fish oil), Ground Whole Grain Barley, Dried Beet Pulp (sugar removed), Chicken Digest, Dried Egg Product... and 34 ingredients starting with Brewers Yeast and ending with Rosemary Extract.

IAMS Weight Control

Corn Meal, Chicken, Ground Whole Grain Sorghum, Chicken By-Product Meal, Ground Whole Grain Barley, Fish Meal (source of fish oil), Dried Beet Pulp (sugar removed), Natural Chicken Flavor, Dried Egg Product, Chicken Fat... and 32 other ingredients starting with Brewers Yeast and ending with Cobalt Carbonate.

NUTRO Senior Natural Choice

Ground Rice, Chicken Meal, Rice Bran, Poultry Fat, Soybean Oil, Natural Flavors, Oatmeal, Oat Bran, Sunflower Oil... and a list of 30 ingredients starting with Pottasium Chloride and ending with folic Acid.

NUTRO Natural Choice Adult Lite

Rice Flour, Lamb Meal, Ground Rice, Rice Bran, Dried Plain Beet Pulp, Poultry Fat, Natural Flavors, Soybean Oil Yeast Culture, Sunflower Oil... and a list of 30 other ingredients starting with potassium chloride and ending with folic acid.

NATURAL BALANCE Reduced Calorie For Seniors Or Overweight Dogs

Brown Rice, Whole Chicken, Pearled Barley, Oatmeal, Chicken Meal, Potatoes, Oat Fiber, Duck, Lamb Meal, Carrots, Natural Flavor, Tomato Pomace, Canola Oil, Chicken Fat, Brewers Yeast, Whole Ground Flaxseed, Lecithin, Rosemary Extract... and a list of 33 ingredients starting with Choline Chloride and ending with Sodium Selenite.

NATURAL BALANCE Organic Formula

Natural Chicken, Organic Brown Rice, Chicken Meal, Organic Oats, Organic Millet, Organic Barley, Organic Sorghum, Organic Potato, Organic Peas, Organic Carrots, Organic Canola Oil, Organic Flaxseed, Chicken Fat... and 37 other ingredients starting with dicalcium phosphate and ending with Sodium Selenite.

(Writer's Note: This formula also contains organic spinach, cranberry, tomato, parsley and yucca in those 37)

PURINA PRO PLAN Senior

Chicken (13%), Maize gluten, Wheat, Dehydrated poultry protein, Rice (10%), Maize, Maize flour, Maize bran, Digest, Beet pulp, Animal fat, Dried egg, Yeast, Fish oil and 12 other ingredients starting with calcium phosphate and ending with rich extracts of natural origin.

PURINA BENEFUL Healthy Weight

Wholegrain Cereals (wheat and/or corn), Poultry and Poultry by-products, Meat and meat by-products (including beef), Vegetable and vegetable by-products (including soy carrot and peas). Sugar, Salt, Minerals (including calcium, iron and zinc), Humectant, Preservative, Essential amino acids, Vitamins (including A, E, B12), Food colours, Emulsifier, Natural flavours, Antioxidants.

(Writer's note. In this case I left all the ingredients in since the exact ones weren't indicated in the case of vitamins, minerals, colours, flavours and antioxidants as they were in other foods)

SUPERCOAT Light and Mature

Wholegrain cereals (wheat and/or sorghum), wheat bran, meat and meat by-products (from chicken and beef), whole linseeds, beet pulp... and 24 other ingredients starting with iodised salt and ending with kelp.

SUPERCOAT Senior Care

Rice, poultry meals and fats, rice bran, linseeds and 21 other ingredients starting with iodised salt and ending with kelp.

NUTRIENCE Senior

Ground corn, chicken meal, chicken fat (preserved with mixed tocopherols and citric acid), dried beet pulp, yeast culture, chicken flavor, lecithin and 49 other ingredients starting with dicalcium phosphate and ending with vitamin D3 supplement.

(Writer's note, it's interesting that this has a number of spices and herbs as ingredients including turmeric, fennel, ginger, fenugreek, cayenne, carob and yucca)

NUTRIENCE Weight Management

Ground corn, chicken meal, dried beet pulp, rice bran, yeast culture, chicken flavor, chicken fat, flaxseed meal, lecithin... and 40 other ingredients starting with dicalcium phosphate and ending with vitamin D3 supplement.

(Writer's note, this has the same herbal spice extracts as above with the addition of dried dandelion)

OK, that's all we have space for. To wind up, remember pet foods are humanized in their packaging, marketing and messages as well as their ingredients and claims. Consumers read the packets, not our pets. And we pay the price so we should know what's real, what's spin and what's illusion by understanding what we feed them. Just like we read our human food labels.

We know this article was tough going for you, the reader, to get to the end here. We also know that some pet food manufacturers may feel targeted or maligned which was not our intent nor, do we believe, the outcome. We invite their response and yours. It was also a hard decision for us to write this as we knew that there might be commercial repercussions, but we were not trying to favour brands nor were we using this article to solicit advertising as you can imagine. None of the advertisers that elected to be a part of this issue knew of the content of this piece nor were they allowed to vet it or influence the outcome. We stand by our research but stand to be corrected if we have made any factual errors.

In the next issue, we're going to take a look at fresh meat compounds, refrigerated prepared foods and other newer foods that are a part of the pet food mix. We have done an immense amount of research and thank the pet food companies that assisted us in getting our food science to a proper level and who also put forward their products to be compared. That took courage. And thanks to you, our readers who asked for this and followed this three part series. Part four in November.

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