

Uncover the Mystery Ingredients in Cat Food

Cat foods come in a range of flavors, formulas and types. Learn how to decipher the labels and choose the right food for your cat.

By Lisa Kobs

You confidently enter the grocery or pet food store to pick up cat food for kitty. Pushing the cart down the aisle, you're astonished by the seemingly endless array of choices. Where did all of these cans and bags come from? Cat foods are labeled Mariner's Catch, Mixed Grill and, can you believe it, Feline Fricassee. You read further. Terms such as by-products and guar gum and carrageenan locust bean are listed. What are these ingredients and how can they help your cat? What was intended to be a quick Saturday errand has turned into an educational foray in an attempt to understand what food is appropriate for your cat.

With so many choices, picking the right food can be a daunting task. However, you can look for certain things. Julie Churchill, DVM, assistant clinical specialist of companion animal nutrition at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul, suggests that when making a cat food selection, it is important to remember all pet foods are not created nutritionally equal.

"There are two ways a company can substantiate a nutritional claim. First, it can claim its food was formulated to meet the Association of American Feed Control Officials [AAFCO] nutrient profiles for a particular life stage. This tells you the nutrition is in the bag, but not necessarily that it can get into the cat. A crude example of this would be to analyze a piece of shoe leather with added fat and a vitamin pill. Analytically, the nutrition is all there, but tells you nothing about important facts such as digestibility or nutrient interaction effects that may interfere with absorption," Dr. Churchill says.

"The second way [for the food] is to undergo AAFCO feeding trials to establish nutritional adequacy, and this is what I recommend looking for," Churchill says. "These foods have proven that the nutrition gets into the cat."

The Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture regulate pet food processing. The AAFCO, an advisory committee, ensures pet food products are safe, nutritionally balanced and properly labeled. It defines ingredients that can and cannot be used, nutritional standards and controls how products are named. If statements about nutrition are printed on the label, they must meet feeding protocols determined by AAFCO.

As part of the quality control process, pet food manufacturers check ingredients for adequate nutritional levels and wholesomeness before they ever go into the food. The food is then checked many times throughout the manufacturing process for important components such as moisture levels, fat content, protein concentration and ash.