Companion Animal Nutrition:

What’s the best commercial pet food?

Any pet food that is complete and balanced will be equivalent to any other. Excess vitamins and minerals will simply be excreted. A diet that is complete and balanced will carry a statement such as “complete and balanced for [the appropriate stage of life] as determined by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) protocol animal testing” on the packaging. The important words in the statement are AAFCO and animal testing.

—Quinton Rogers, PhD, professor of molecular biosciences

What about table scraps?

Some table scraps can make appropriate treats for dogs, but watch out for high-fat, high-calorie items like chicken skin and fat trimmings. A better choice would be carrots, broccoli, apple slices and unsalted rice cakes—dogs love these as treats.

Meat and animal organs should be cooked, just like for humans, because they could harbor parasites or harmful bacteria. Raw eggs could contain Salmonella, and eating too many eggs could produce a vitamin B deficiency.

—Tim Bowers, DVM, resident clinician

Is it a good idea to give my dog treats?

Sharing food with your pet helps forge the human-animal bond—but be careful your dog doesn’t train you to provide treats instead of his regular food! Generally, snacks should not exceed 10 percent of the animal’s total caloric intake, which is equivalent to about seven medium-sized dog biscuits per day for a 70 lb. Labrador retriever.

—Tim Bowers, DVM, resident clinician

How do I know how much to feed my pet?

It is important to make sure your animal companion’s overall diet is appropriate to her size, age and activity level. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the precise amount to feed your animal—any calculation is an estimate and needs to be adjusted for each individual animal.

In the United States it is estimated that 25–44 percent of dogs are overweight. Obesity can make dogs susceptible to pancreatitis, diabetes, skin diseases, breathing disorders and joint problems.

A caution: just because an animal is getting “fat” doesn’t necessarily mean he’s eating too much. If your pet seems overweight, especially if he shows any other signs or symptoms, he should be checked by your veterinarian to make sure he isn’t suffering from a serious medical condition such as hypothyroidism or diabetes.

—Stanley Marks, BVSc, PhD, assistant professor of small animal medicine, diplomate ACVIM: Internal Medicine and Oncology, diplomate ACVN (American College of Veterinary Nutrition)

How do I get my dog to eat more?

Sometimes canine companions who are fussy eaters or have poor appetites may need your help in making their food more appealing. Warming the dog’s regular diet, or adding warm water, brings out the natural aromas of the food. Warm chicken or turkey broth (low sodium) or “tuna water” can be substituted for warm water. Products like garlic powder or Stewart’s flavor enhancer can be sprinkled over the food for added appeal, or a little honey mixed in if the dog has a sweet tooth. Please remember that a poor appetite may indicate a more serious medical problem, and your veterinarian should evaluate the dog right away.

—Ana Hill, DVM, resident clinician

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