

# Understanding Dog Food Labels



Croney Research Group

The American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) has standards for pet foods.

## Name of Food

The name must accurately describe the food. This includes what animal the food is for and the main ingredient(s).

Do you see the terms **dinner**, **entrée**, **platter**, **nuggets**, or **formula** in the title? This means the ingredient in the title must account for 25 – 95% of the food content excluding water.

Ingredients listed in the title after the term “with” (for example, Chicken with Beef) must be at least 3% of the food content.

To use the term “flavor,” the food must taste of the ingredient.



## Ingredients List

The most prominent ingredient by weight, including water, is listed first.

Any ingredients used in the name of a dog food must account for 95% of the content by weight excluding water.

Including water, ingredients used in the name should comprise 70% of the content.

**Meat or meat by-products** must come from cattle, swine, sheep, or goats.

**Meat Meal:** processed tissue such as esophagus, diaphragm, heart, and tongue.

**Meat by-products:** non-rendered, non-muscle, animal tissues that are suitable for animal food. This can include (but is not limited to): blood, bone, brains, cleaned intestines, kidneys, livers, lungs, spleens, and empty stomachs.

Ingredients that are not allowed in dog food include: hair, hooves, horns, and teeth.

The American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) standards require that dog food labels include:

**Name of Food:** The name must accurately describe the food. This includes what animal the food is for and the main ingredient(s).

**Ingredients List:** Ingredients lists must be a consistent font, size, and color, using AAFCO-defined names. The order of ingredients must represent the amount in the food (descending by weight).

**Intended use\*:** States the intended use of the food, such as “Complete Food for Dogs,” “Veterinary Diet for [species],” “[Species] Treat,” “[Species] Food Supplement,” or “[Species] Food Mixer.”

**Guarantor:** The guarantor is responsible for ensuring that the food and the label match. The guarantor’s name and principal business address must appear on the dog food label.

The guarantor is usually the company who made the product. When not the manufacturer, the contact information must include: “manufactured for” or “distributed by.” When not manufactured in the United States, the label must indicate the country where the food is manufactured.



**Organic:** AAFCO considers an ingredient organic if it meets the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) standards. The term organic on a dog food label indicates that 95% of the ingredients in a food are organic. If the label states that a food is “made with organic” ingredients, this amount must be at least 70%. Individual ingredients in the ingredients list can be labelled as organic.



**Natural:** The AAFCO definition of natural refers to “a feed or feed ingredient derived solely from plant, animal or mined sources.”

**\*Indicates new changes approved by AAFCO in 2023.  
The implementation period for these changes is 2023-2029.**

Nutritional information will be presented in a box labeled “Pet Nutrition Facts.”\*

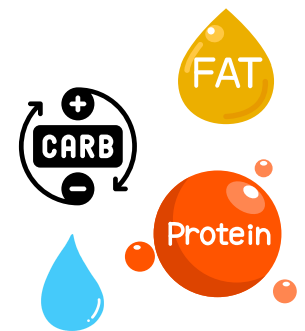


**Nutritional Adequacy:** A statement that the food has the correct amount of essential nutrients to meet life-stage-specific health needs. A diet should be complete (has all required nutrients) and balanced (correct ratios of nutrients are present).

**AAFCO Statement:** Indicates that the AAFCO standards for nutritional adequacy have been met. The statement does not indicate approval, certification, or endorsement.

**Guaranteed Analysis:** All dog food labels include an analysis of the minimum amounts of crude fat and crude protein and the maximum amounts of crude fiber and moisture.

**\*New labels will need to include:** Guaranteed protein, fat, total carbohydrates, dietary fiber, and moisture.



**Caloric Content:** Listed in kilocalories per kilogram of food as fed and per familiar unit – such as per biscuit, can, or cup, depending upon the food item.

**\*New labels will be required to include calories from protein, fat, and carbohydrates**

**Life Stage:** Individual dogs have unique nutritional needs based on life stage. AAFCO has nutritional standards for four different life stages:

- Gestation/lactation
- Growth
- Maintenance
- All life stages



**Feeding Instructions:** Guidelines for the amount to feed per pound of dog body weight. For certain puppy diets, this may be per pound of expected body weight.

**Food Storage:** Packaging may have instructions on how the food should be stored (such as refrigeration or freezing).\*

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