How to figure out which food is best for your pet
By Lisa Bloch

Walk into any pet supply store and you’ll see a dizzying array of food choices for our pets. Dry or canned? Dehydrated or fresh? Grain-free? Vegan? It can be a bit overwhelming, especially considering that up until about 20 years ago, there were only a handful of options and most people simply bought pet food while shopping at the grocery store.

On one hand, it’s a real sign of progress in how we care for our pets that we have so many choices. More and more pet parents are recognizing the importance of feeding their pets healthy food and valuing them as individuals with different needs and taste preferences. On the other hand, with almost $29 billion a year in sales in the United States alone, we can’t ignore the fact that the pet food industry is big business, which means we need to be as educated as possible about what’s best — and what won’t needlessly break the bank.

First, just like with human food, it’s good to try to steer clear of artificial colors and flavors, added hormones and preservatives. This type of food — easily found at supermarkets and convenience stores — is referred to as “junk pet food” since it has a lot of extra “junk” in it.

Second, it’s important to recognize that cats and dogs have differing nutritional requirements. Cats are obligate carnivores, meaning their diet must contain at least 85% animal protein. They cannot synthesize the taurine they need from vegetable protein sources and cannot survive on a vegetarian diet. Dogs, on the other hand, should have a diet with 56% protein; however, it does not have to be animal protein.

Now that we know what kind of food our pets need in general, it’s time to pick the food that’s right for them. A good way to start is with your veterinarian, who will determine if your pet needs a special diet. Some animals have skin or gastrointestinal issues, or allergies that may call for specialized food. If your pet doesn’t have any special dietary needs, the first major decision is wet (canned) or dry food (kibble).

Since wet food is, well, wet, it can be a good source of extra hydration. It also means your pet can enjoy a larger portion without adding more calories. Wet food is helpful for
older animals or those that have lost some sense of smell as it’s richer in scent and flavor. Once it’s been opened, it needs to be covered, refrigerated and used within a short window. Many people believe it’s less economical than dry food.

Of course, dry food is the most convenient for storage and feeding. It can be left out for hours, if not days, and not spoil. But dry food doesn’t provide extra hydration and tends to have lower levels of animal-based proteins. It’s often said that dry food is better for pets’ teeth but that’s not correct.

In recent years, some pet parents have opted to feed their animals a homemade “raw food” diet. While these diets can be beneficial, it’s important to learn exactly how to provide them with all the needed nutrients. It’s not as simple as just giving your dog raw hamburger meat or your cat a raw egg. As veterinarian Jessica Vogelsang writes, “According to a 2013 study on raw food diets for pets published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, only five recipes of the 200 evaluated provided adequate levels of essential nutrients as established by National Research Council guidelines.”

While raw diets do contain a large amount of meat, they should be complemented by other ingredients such as organs, bones, eggs, vegetables and seafood (cooked mussels or oysters). And with any raw meats, safe food handling practices should be used to avoid contamination to our pets and us. That’s a lot of work for the average pet parent. Lastly, it’s important to pay attention to the amount of food (and treats) we’re giving our fur babies. Obesity rates among pets have skyrocketed in recent years, so while you’re reading that list of ingredients, be sure to read the recommended feeding amounts, too.

Bark appetit!

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director of Marin Humane which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, email lbloch@marinhumane.org or find us on social media @marinhumane.