Dog Food 101

With so many brands and types of dog food available at the supermarket, pet shop, and veterinarian’s office, it’s hard to decipher what, precisely, is the difference between them all and how to select the best option for your pet.

Good nutrition is imperative to your pet’s general health. Good puppy formulas are designed to help your puppy grow cognitively and physically by having a higher protein, fat, calcium, and omega 3 fatty acid content than adult foods. Dogs over the age of 7 should be fed a formula that reflects the dietary requirements of a senior dog. Generally, mature dogs are less active and therefore require less fat than younger dogs. Mature formulas might also include omega 3 fatty acids and glucosamine to support joint health and reduce inflammation and might be formulated to decrease tartar buildup and promote dental health.

In general, the quality of dog food really is reflected in the price. Economical brands will feature ingredients that have little to no nutritional value to your dog. “Meat meal” can be obtained from any source of meat and its nutritional value is therefore questionable: look instead for specifically-named meats (“chicken”, “lamb”, “fish”). By-product meal is not necessarily a “bad” ingredient as many ingredients that are considered by-products (such as liver) are actually very nutrient-rich and high in vitamins, but “chicken by-product meal” is a lesser ingredient then “chicken” or “chicken meal”. Carbohydrates from cereal grains (corn, rice, barley, wheat, oats) are a great source of energy for your dog and provide dry kibble with its structure and texture. However, not all carbohydrates are created equal: look for the words “ground” and “meal” and avoid “mill run”. Fiber keeps your dog satiated, aids in digestion, and supports colon health. Again, though, the quality of the fiber is important to consider: brown rice and beet pulp, for instance, are excellent sources of fiber while cellulose and any type of “hull” are fillers and offer no nutritional value. Sugars—such as corn syrup—are addicting to dogs (just as they are to humans), offer no value, and should be avoided.

Once you have determined a good choice of food for your dog, you should work with your veterinarian to decide how much of the food your dog requires to maintain a healthy weight. A good starting point is to reference the information provided on most dog food bags, taking into account your dog’s personal level of activity (a sedentary dog will require far fewer calories per day then a very active dog). Puppies will need to be fed four times a day when they are first weaned and gradually reduced to two meals. Adult dogs should be fed in two meals. Remember, too, that dry food should be stored in an air-tight container or in the bag if it has a zipper seal. Generally, dry food should be eaten within a few months—it can also be frozen. Wet food should be stored in the refrigerator once opened and eaten within a week.

Inform yourself about the dietary requirements of your pet by talking with your veterinarian: he/she will be able to take into account your pet’s age, breed, lifestyle, and medical history to help determine what type of food is most important for your pet.