

## How much meat is really in that bag of pet food?

When people begin the search for better dry foods for their animals they're often told -- "Look for more meat!" We certainly think that a meat-based diet is best for dogs and cats -- as long as the food is balanced with the necessary vitamins, minerals and fatty acids -- but a meat-based diet is not what you find in a bag of dry food, no matter what the label says!

### **The weight of ingredients determines the order in which they are listed on the label**

The rules about labeling allow ingredients with the same weight to be listed together. The manufacturer can choose the order of ingredients. For example, if a formula is 15% by weight meat, rice, wheat, and rice flour, the manufacturer usually lists the meat first. The label will read "meat, rice, wheat, rice flour...." Look closely at all the grain sources when you read an ingredient panel for pet food. If you see three grain sources after the meat, that food is mostly grain, and the manufacturer is playing the "meat first" game.

### **Should "Real Meat" come first on the label?**

Manufacturers use two types of meat in their dog and cat foods: real meat and meat meal. Meat meal is the meat with the water removed for ease of handling and production. One pound of chicken yields about .3 pounds of chicken meal. (See our article about calculating dry matter basis)

Production managers prefer to work with meat meals, not real meats. Real meat is a tricky ingredient for manufacturers. Because it is mostly water, meat causes problems in production, and it also requires significant amounts of freezer space, which most pet food plants do not have. Meat meals are easier to use and store than real meat. Marketing departments want meat listed first, and they often dictate which ingredients are used.

The marketing departments of some of the leading premium dry pet foods have taught us to look for real meat in their dry pet foods, or, at least, meat listed first on the label. This is not necessarily good advice.

In theory, it seems that real "Chicken" or "Lamb" should head the list of ingredients on a pet food label. Labels of "healthy foods" tell us that "Real Meat! Never Been Frozen" is included, and it looks like this must be the major ingredient. This is not always the case! All the water is still in the chicken or lamb, and not in any of the other ingredients. If the water were removed from the chicken, it would weigh 60 - 75% less. Based upon its dry matter (DM) weight, it may move far down the ingredient list.

#### ***Formula One: Chicken, Ground Rice, Rice Flour...***

There are three major ingredients in the "Real Meat" formula above. In many of the formulas we've seen, the first three ingredients all have the same amount by weight -- each would represent about 25- 30% of the formula. On a dry matter basis, this food may have very little meat protein in it. Even if it's 30% "real" chicken, on a dry matter basis it's only about 7-8% chicken! Most of the protein comes from grain and other non-meat protein sources. The "meat first" does not add a lot to the protein level of the food, but it makes the food attractive to consumers.

This does not mean that all real meat first foods have low meat content on a dry matter basis. The quality brands usually have, besides fresh chicken, some chicken meal to enhance the meat based protein sources.

#### ***Formula Two: Chicken meal, ground rice, rice flour.....***

This food, on the other hand, probably has much more meat protein than the last example. On a dry matter basis, this has at least 25-30% meat -- perhaps three times as much meat as the previous example.

**“Look for two or more meat sources in the first five ingredients”: is there really more meat?**

This advice, often seen in articles on how to choose healthy foods, is intended to be an easy way to sort out the “more meat” food from those that use mostly grain or soy to boost their protein levels. However, having meat listed two times does not necessarily mean more meat.

***Formula Three: chicken, ground rice, rice flour, poultry fat, chicken meal....***

The first four ingredients may be 95% of the formula. The chicken meal may be there so the sales person can say “we have two types of meat in the first five ingredients – more meat.”

**“Meat First” with dry ingredients: How much lamb, how much rice?**

***Formula Four: Lamb meal, Ground Rice, Rice Flour, Rice Bran, ... rice gluten***

Above are the main ingredients of a popular, simple, lamb and rice “healthy” dry food. Rice and rice parts are listed four times. There may be the same amount of lamb meal as ground rice, rice flour, and rice bran, because they are listed in order. Each might each contribute the same weight to the formula. The rice gluten listed further down the line is pure protein, and is a contributor to the protein level of the food, which allows the manufacturer to use less meat meal. This food may contain greater than three times more rice than lamb.

**The protein doesn’t all come from meat**

Some of the protein content of all dry foods comes from the grain. For example, wheat can have 14% protein. It’s often used in dry food. Gluten, the protein in wheat, helps to hold food together and provides a boost to the protein level of the food that costs less than meat ingredients.

**Want more meat? Add it yourself!**

We think it’s wise to add fresh meat to dry foods. Dry foods are high in carbohydrates, and lower in protein than is the natural diet of dogs and cats. Meat adds protein, and therefore decreases the percentage of carbohydrate.

A typical maintenance dry food provides 50% or more of its calories as carbohydrate. The natural diet of a dog has about 14% of the calories coming from carbohydrate. Though dry cat foods are higher in protein than dog foods, they are far higher in carbohydrate than is optimum for a cat.

If you feed dry food, your animals will benefit from the addition of fresh meat and other foods. We recommend adding up to 15% (by volume) fresh, raw or lightly cooked meat to your animal’s diet. If you want to feed more fresh meat than this, learn to make your own fresh food diet, or purchase a commercially prepared complete meat-based diet. If your cat or dog is ill, we recommend that you consult with a veterinarian who is familiar with fresh food diets to help you.

We hope that this discussion will help you decide that no dry food can provide a meat-based diet! Our dogs and cats (and other carnivore companion animals) will be healthier and live longer if we feed them according to the needs of their species.

For more information, please read our book, *See Spot Live Longer*, available from [www.naturalpetproducts.com](http://www.naturalpetproducts.com)

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