



Think "Two by Two" when Choosing the Best Dog Food

When I adopted my Labrador Retriever through a local rescue group, I could tell she had seen better days. She was clearly 15-20 pounds overweight and her fur was quite sparse. She had been abandoned, after living with a family for over five years, so I knew she needed to be loved unconditionally and to get the highest quality care. She received these immediately, as I prayed that overwhelming damage had not yet been done.

What I underestimated was the importance of a high quality diet. Once I transitioned her to a healthy diet, I was amazed at the turnaround. The pounds came off, though a daily walk certainly helped. In addition, her fur filled in to become thick and luxurious, changing her appearance dramatically.

I did quite a bit of research when choosing her food, and have stuck to these guidelines for the past eight years she's been with us. Now at 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ years old she's still going strong, a testament to the fact that you can undo damage, even after many years.

I consider these my "Noah's Ark" guidelines, since they come in two's. The first two ingredients on dog food are the most important along with two "statements" you should always see listed on the label.

1. The first ingredient **should be always be meat**, without exception. In addition, the label should specify what kind of meat it is. Terms like "beef", "chicken" and "liver" are much better than the general terms "meat" or even "poultry."
2. The second ingredient should again **list a specific meat, followed by the term "meal."** So again, "beef meal" or "chicken meal" is preferred over "poultry meal."

Once you've covered the first two ingredients you clearly know the majority of the contents, since ingredients are listed in descending order of prominence. So the ingredient that makes up the greatest percentage of the contents is listed first.

Additional ingredients can be listed as "by-products" or grains. The term "by-products" turns some people off, but these are actually nutritious organs (liver, lungs, etc.) which add to your pet's diet. Grains are fine as well, since they are a good source of energy. Of course if your pet has a specific allergy to a grain, that makes the ingredient off limits.

Next, let's look for the two statements you should see on every dog food label:

1. All pet food should have a **nutritional adequacy statement**. It will read something similar to, "This food is complete and balanced for all life stages," or "This food is complete and balanced for adult maintenance." These statements reassure the buyer that your dog's complete nutritional needs have been taken into consideration and will be met by the food.
2. There should also be a second statement which addresses **how the manufacturer has verified that the food actually is "complete and balanced"**. It may be done through feeding trials with actual pets (preferred) or simply formulated to meet the desired blend of nutrients.

As you evaluate various brands, keep in mind that there is very little regulation of what goes into pet food. The USDA and FDA are not involved at all! The definition of commonly used terms, such as "holistic", "organic" and "natural" is left completely up to the manufacturer. Don't pay more for this extra bit of branding, unless you know for sure it's more than just marketing!