

Animal nutrition – fuel for life.....

Animals have various nutritional requirements, which changes throughout their lives depending basically on their breed, age, breeding status, weight and lifestyle. On a basic level, cats and dogs require approximately 50 different essential nutrients, in varying quantities, depending on their individual requirements. These must be in the correct form and in the right amount to provide 'balanced' diets in order to promote optimal health; too much or too little may cause deficiencies or toxicities.

Many people consider raw food diets (BARF) or home cooked diets to be the gold standard for feeding pets. However, it can be difficult to adequately balance these diets and they can be very expensive to sustain especially in multi pet households.

A vast amount of commercial life-stage diets are available from various companies that offer to fulfil the basic requirements of individual pets. Some are only mixer foods i.e. have to be supplemented in order to be a complete diet. Owners need to be aware of types of ingredients and differing constituents in food such as protein and fat amounts for example. Another main point to note is the difference between wet and dry diets that may be mixer/complete diets.

	Wet Diets	Semi Moist	Dry Diets
Water Content	Approx 70 -85%	Approx 30%	Approx 10%
Complete/Mixer	Complete	Complete	Either
Main Advantage	Increase fluid intake for example important in certain conditions	Tend to be very palatable & water can be added to increase water intake as required	Dental health advantages due to mechanical removal of tartar etc

Feeding puppies and kittens

This is the most important feeding stage- pups are fed according to their adult size/breed while kittens are fed a general kitten or breed specific diet (example Persian kitten). Puppies and kittens should be weighed frequently and the food required per weight adjusted accordingly. Generally, puppy growth diets are divided into three groups: - small breed, medium breed and large breed. This is due to differing growth rates and the age when maturity is reached. Smaller breeds tend to grow quicker and reach maturity earlier, therefore require higher protein and calorie containing diets. Large breeds should grow at a slower rate over a longer period of time therefore need a lower protein and fat diet. This is to prevent rapid growth rates and to reduce the predisposition of serious developmental orthopaedic disorders.

Adult maintenance

Adult diets depending largely on breed variations, for example some smaller breeds can reach full maturity from six months; larger and giant breeds from between 12 to 18 months. Overall, an adult pet has less protein and fat requirements therefore the quantity of diet fed will depend on 1) the quality of the diet, 2) amount of exercise the animal receives, 3) weight, 4) neutering status and 5) metabolism. Some adults such as working or high energy expending dogs like Springer spaniels may require diets with a much higher energy density during working periods or to maintain ideal weight. Care should be taken to avoid over-feeding an adult pet as excessive calories will result in rapid weight gain, which will have an adverse effect on their health and well being.

Senior diets

The onset of a senior or geriatric life phase varies; smaller and medium breeds at approximately eight years of age, with large and giant breeds at five years. Normally cats are deemed senior from eight years. In the main, senior diets contain lowered fat and protein levels due to decreased activity levels. In some cases, the senior pet may have reduced capacity to absorb and use nutrients so requiring a specialised diet. The exception to this is in the case of cats, their maintenance energy requirements do not change as they get older.

Breed-specific diets

Diets aimed at reducing the risk of certain breeds' disposition to certain disorders/disease have also been introduced, for example specialised lower calorie mobility diets for Labradors. Certain breeds have different characteristics – some long-haired cat breeds are more likely to need a diet with a hairball element.

Therapeutic diets

Owners of pets suffering from certain conditions such as kidney or arthritis disease can slow down the progression or even improve this by using special commercial therapeutic formulas. For example, decreasing phosphate levels in order to aid in renal function etc

There are numerous options available to pet owners to meet any pet's nutritional requirements but not all are alike in the provision of a healthy, balanced diet. Therefore, it is essential to understand the differences in these diets and to understand the role of proper nutrition in the optimal well being and health of pets. Any veterinary clinic staff will be well aware of existing pet food options and are available to help owners pick the best suited formula for their pet.