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Caring People Caring for Animals

Myths and Misconceptions Surrounding Pet Foods: Grain Free, Natural, Holistic, Organic, Raw

Holistic

The dictionary defines holistic as “relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than with the analysis of, treatment of, or dissection into parts”. Essentially, it means considering the needs of the whole animal, not just certain systems or particular aspects of nutritional needs. However, no definition of the term has been generally accepted by the pet food industry, and there currently are no regulations or legal definitions for labeling a food “holistic”, allowing for misrepresentation of the term and its implications of benefit. Moreover, based on the dictionary definition, all satisfactory pet foods are holistic.

Organic

This refers to the way ingredients are grown, harvested, and processed. The USDA has yet to define “organic” as it applies to pet foods. In the interim, pet foods meeting the human standard may display the organic seal with the following restrictions:

- ❖ “Organic” - If **100%** organic, may display the organic seal.
- ❖ “Organic” - If at least **95%** of the content is organic by weight (excluding salt and water), it may display the organic seal.
- ❖ “Made with Organic” - If at least **70%** of the content is organic. Can cite up to three specific ingredients or classes of ingredients on the front panel. Cannot use the USDA official organic seal.
- ❖ If less than **70%** of the content is organic only those organic ingredients may be listed and only on the ingredients panel with no mention of ‘organic’ elsewhere on the product. These foods cannot display the USDA official organic seal.

Raw / B.A.R.F. (Biologically Appropriate Raw Foods/ Bones And Raw Foods)

These diets are produced to provide a diet thought to mimic what cats and dogs eat “in the wild”. These diets generally consist of variable combinations of raw meats, grains, vegetables, and bones. Like grain-free diets, there is no scientific evidence that feeding a raw vs. a conventional diet is any more beneficial to an animal’s health. However there is ample evidence that it is not. These diets also have generated controversy due to their increased risk for microbial contamination. Exposure of pets and their owners to dangerous bacteria have the potential to cause serious illness. Careful cleaning of all food handling surfaces must be practiced to prevent microbes from contaminated foods to humans and pets. There is also risk of gastrointestinal problems and/or injury from bones in the diet, and the possibility of an unbalanced raw diet causing nutritional deficiencies and directly resulting in illness. We recommend that these diets be carefully selected and researched before use, and then only by owners comfortable with safe handling procedures for raw foods.

Corn (and other grains)

In recent years corn has been described as a low quality “filler” in pet foods, and implicated as the culprit in pets with food allergies (typically by competitor food companies). In reality, corn provides a nutritious, affordable source of carbohydrate for energy, essential amino and fatty acids for healthy skin, coat and immune system function, and a variety of other nutrients. These nutrients are released during the manufacturing process, and are easily absorbed and utilized when included in complete diets. With regard to corn as an allergen, few veterinarians or veterinary nutritionists believe that corn is a highly allergic food. They often cite the fact that other common ingredients, like wheat, dairy, soy, and beef, are much more frequently associated with food allergies. Moreover, we must remember that the problem in patients with allergies is with the immune system of the individual rather than with any external substance, which has no effect on those with healthy immune systems. For those pets that are proven to be sensitive to ingredients in foods through feeding elimination trials, the ingredient should obviously be avoided, but otherwise it remains a cost-efficient, quality nutrient source for pet foods.

It also bears mentioning that no objective scientific evidence has yet demonstrated that feeding *Grain Free, Natural, Holistic, Organic, or Raw* diets to otherwise healthy pets, when compared to conventional diets, leads to a better outcome for the pet.