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## **Best Dog Food Choices: Dry, Wet, Organic, and More**

From key ingredients and regulations to choosing dry, organic, holistic, or wet dog food, WebMD reveals which food is best for your canine companion.

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Pet store aisles are lined with dozens of brands of [dog food](#). There's dry food, canned food, and semi-moist food. Then there are all the labels: natural, holistic, super-premium, organic. How do you know which one is right for your [dog](#)?

To help you find the best food for your furry companion, WebMD went to the experts to get answers to eight common questions about dog food.

### **1. If a dog food is more expensive, does that mean it's better?**

Many dog owners these days splurge on expensive dog foods, thinking they are buying the best for their dog. But when it comes to quality, price isn't a good guideline, says Joseph Wakshlag, DVM, PhD, assistant professor of clinical nutrition at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Nutrition.

"I've seen 'all-natural, holistic' dog foods that perform really poorly in dogs, and I've seen some dog foods that you might not want to feed your dog, that perform better," he says. "I don't think you get what you pay for."

### **2. What is dog food made of?**

Dog food ingredients vary, depending on the manufacturer and the brand, but most meet standards set by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). Those standards cover protein, which supplies necessary amino acids; fatty acids, vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. Depending on the manufacturer, the food could contain protein from animal and/or plant sources, grains or other types of carbohydrates, fat, moisture, vitamins, and minerals. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is responsible for ensuring that pet foods are safe and labeled appropriately.

### **3. How do I choose a high-quality dog food?**

Check the label first for the AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement, which indicates the food provides complete and balanced nutrition. It should also include the life stage for which the food is appropriate. Life stages include growth (appropriate for puppies), adult maintenance,

[gestation](#)/lactation, senior (appropriate for older dogs), and “all life stages.” A food labeled for all life stages can be used throughout a dog’s life, from weaning through adulthood.

When choosing a food, look for one that fits your pet’s flavor preferences, lifestyle, medical conditions, and environment, says Susan Wynn, DVM, AHG, a nutritionist for Georgia Veterinary Specialists in the Atlanta area and a clinical resident in small animal nutrition with the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine.

Use the food for six to eight weeks to see how it affects your dog, says Wakshlag, who accepts some research funding from a major pet food manufacturer. Good signs: A shiny coat and a pet that looks healthy. If the dog is producing a large volume of stools or develops [diarrhea](#), he may have problems digesting a food. If a dog has [skin](#), ear, joint, or other problems, try another food to see if there’s a connection, Wynn says.

“What’s great for one dog may not adequately support another,” she says. “It’s important to try a wide variety of diets to find the optimum.”

#### 4. Which is better, dry dog food or canned?

It depends on your pet and your preferences. Dry dog food costs less per serving than semi-moist or canned foods and its nutrients are more concentrated, meaning you’ll need to feed less. That’s because dry food contains less moisture. On average, the moisture content of dog foods is 6% to 10% for dry, 15% to 30% for semi-moist, and 75% for canned.

Canned food might be better for dogs with [urinary tract](#) problems because of its higher moisture content, Wakshlag says. Canned foods also allow feeding a greater volume of food for the same amount of calories, which may help if your dog is overweight. Some dry foods are designed to help ‘clean’ the [teeth](#) during chewing, but dogs with severe dental problems may do better on a moist food.

Other things to keep in mind, depending on your pet’s health condition: Canned foods tend to be higher in fat and protein, with fewer carbohydrates; semi-moist foods contain humectants, such as sugar, to keep it from drying out; and dry foods will always contain some starch, Wynn says.

#### 5. What do labels like “organic,” “holistic,” or “all-natural” mean?

At the moment, there is no official definition for organic pet food. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is expected to issue rules soon.

“Holistic,” like “premium” and “super-premium,” is a marketing term. There is no official definition of these terms. “Natural” means only that the product contains no synthetic ingredients, says Teresa Crenshaw, interim chair of AAFCO’s Pet Food Committee. Because some vitamins and minerals may only be available in synthetic form, AAFCO does allow animal foods with those ingredients to carry a “natural” label, with a disclaimer. A dog food or treat that contains baking powder, for example, cannot be labeled as natural because baking powder is a product of chemical synthesis.

## 6. How much should I feed my dog?

One of the most common mistakes dog owners make is “feeding too much,” Wakshlag says. About one-fourth of dogs are overweight, putting them at higher risk of [arthritis](#) and other health problems. Package labels often overestimate how much food is needed, but vets advise using these as a guideline. You’ll know you’re overfeeding your dog if you cannot feel its ribs, there are visible fat deposits on its back and at the base of its tail, and you can’t see a waist behind the ribs when looking down at your pet.

On the other hand, if a dog is underweight you’ll easily be able to see his ribs, vertebrae, and pelvic bones, and you won’t feel any fat over his bones.

Puppies need about twice as many calories per pound as an adult dog of the same breed. Older dogs need 20% fewer calories than middle-aged dogs because they are less active and have slower metabolisms, according to “Nutrient Requirements of Dogs and Cats,” a 2006 report from the National Research Council, a scientific research unit of the nonprofit National Academies.

## 7. How often should I feed my dog?

After weaning, puppies should be fed three times a day until they’re about 16 weeks of age. You can switch to twice-daily feedings then. But it’s OK to wait until six months if you’re concerned the larger volume of food will be harder to digest.

Adult dogs can be fed once or twice daily. Twice-daily feeds make for better digestibility, Wakshlag says.

## 8. What’s the best way to switch to a new dog food?

Allow six to seven days to switch foods, to give your dog’s digestive system time to adjust. Serve a mix that’s one-quarter new food, three-quarters existing food, for the first two days. Change the mix to half-and-half for two days, then move to three-quarters new food, one-quarter existing food for the final two or three days.