



BVA policy position on diet choices for cats and dogs

Introduction

Under the UK Animal Welfare Acts, animal owners and keepers must ensure that they meet the five welfare needs of animals, including the need for a suitable diet. They must therefore ensure that the animals in their care receive a diet which meets their nutritional needs, to be protected from any pain, suffering, injury or disease that may result from being fed an inappropriate diet. However, with a range of factors to consider, choosing the most suitable diet for a pet can be complex, and access to clear, scientifically sound information can be challenging.

This policy position provides information on key considerations when choosing a suitable diet for cats and dogs, including meeting nutritional needs, safety and sustainability of ingredients, welfare of production animals, and the role of the veterinary profession. It does not attempt to determine which diet is most suitable for particular animals, instead highlighting factors owners should consider to meet the needs. It aims to provide clear, independent information and recommendations which support the veterinary profession when discussing companion animal feeding. It focuses on feeding cats and dogs, the two most popular companion animals in the UK, but takes a principles-based approach which may be applicable to other companion animal species. In this document, the term **companion animal** is consumed and therefore supplements, treats, liquids, and health related products such as dental chews eaten by the pet.

bringing together veterinary professionals with expertise in nutrition, animal health and welfare, and sustainability, with evidence received from a wide range of stakeholders. Further detail on information considered by the group is available in the [Companion Animal Feeding Working Group report](#).

Food choices for cats and dogs

Meeting nutritional needs

The food we provide to pets must fulfil their nutritional requirements and failure to do so can lead to a number of health issues, including malnutrition, obesity, a range of diseases such as kidney, gastrointestinal and dental disease. Like humans, cats and dogs need a range of nutrients including essential amino acids, vitamins, and minerals, which must be carefully balanced to keep them healthy, but we must remember that they do not have the same digestive systems and needs as humans or each other, and they have evolved to have different needs to their wild counterparts^{1,2}. Trends in human nutrition can transfer into pet diets, for example an interest in human paleo diets is now reflected in some owners aiming to feed their dog **raw**, which may sound logical but is not supported by scientific evidence, with studies showing dogs have evolved to eat more varied diets.

growing interest in food containing alternative proteins, such as insects, cultured meat, yeast, and algae. Food can be further categorised by method of processing, eg if it is wet or dry (kibble), and whether it is cooked or raw (comprising of uncooked animal tissue). The range of options available makes choosing a suitable diet for any animal complex. However, when choosing a product, the first classification to consider is whether the food is complete, meaning it has been formulated to meet the nutritional needs of the pet, or complementary, such as treats, snacks and some pet foods. Complete diets, when fed as instructed, are required to meet all nutritional requirements appropriate to the life stage of the animal for which they are marketed

Safety, sustainability, and production animal welfare

Safety of ingredients

As well as ensuring a diet is nutritious for animals to eat, it is essential that safety, for both the animal consuming it and wider public health, is also safeguarded. Regulations and monitoring are in place to ensure this, with anything orally fed to pets being covered by feed regulations, including dental chews and other products which may be ingested. The [Food Standards Agency \(FSA\)](#) is the competent authority responsible for this legislation, working to ensure feed is safe, is what it says it is, and helping to make food healthier and more sustainable for everyone¹⁶.

[register via a local authority](#), who are responsible for monitoring the feed activities carried out on the premises.

Despite careful regulation and monitoring, issues can arise which impact animal health and welfare

dog^{30,31,32,33}, but further research is needed and any benefits should be assessed against potential risks. Until further clarity can be provided, potential health risks must be highlighted, and owners considering a raw diet must be aware of hygiene measures, safe storage and handling advice, as increased awareness can only help to reduce any possible adverse effects. This is especially important for immunocompromised people, young children, the elderly and pregnant women who are likely to be at increased risk. Useful advice

practice and support animal owners in their decision making. The [UK Pet food sustainability handbook](#) contains helpful advice for manufacturers.

Recommendation 5: BVA to raise awareness of the complexities around diet choice in a one health context.

Recommendation 6: BVA to provide clear explanations on what animal by-products are, including their role in sustainable food systems.

Welfare of food producing animals

Decisions on diet choices for cats and dogs should not only take into account the health and welfare of the animal being fed, but also of the production animals used to produce the food. Animal health and welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human want or need, as explained in the [BVA sustainable UK agriculture policy position](#). Ideally, pet food products with animal-derived ingredients would include clear labelling on the welfare of the animals used to produce the food, including the country they are sourced from, to support owners in choosing higher-welfare products. However, this is not currently possible for the majority of products due to a lack of segregation for

knowledge to engage in such conversations^{51,52}. There may be a tendency to direct interested clients to other team members or shut down the discussion to avoid long, potentially difficult conversations, which does not help to build trust or understanding and may have contributed to owners generally seeking nutritional advice from other sources. To support their role as a trusted independent source of information, veterinary professionals should also be wary of perceived or actual conflicts of interest if promoting a specific pet food, eg through branded items in the practice, and should ensure their actions are in line with BVA [Transparency and client choice guidance](#) and the [RCVS code of conduct](#).

Education on nutrition for healthy cats and dogs is limited and variable in initial training for both veterinary surgeons and nurses, with the emphasis more likely to be on clinical nutrition, ie for sick animals. Only one UK veterinary school currently has Board certified veterinary nutritionists in their team, and although schools do invite guest experts to lecture on nutrition, these are often optional sessions. This has resulted in an information provision gap which has largely been filled by the pet food industry, including through sponsored sessions and student representatives