

What do vets learn about nutrition?

If diet is the foundation of good health, why isn't nutrition a priority at vet school?

BY SHAWN MESSONNIER, DVM



As a holistic veterinarian, I understand the importance of proper nutrition for my patients. No matter what therapies I use to treat my patients - conventional medications, herbs, homeopathics or nutritional supplements - unless they are eating the proper diet my treatment plan will never achieve its maximum results. How much do veterinarians learn about nutrition? The sad answer is not a lot, and often our

information is biased. I actually learned much more about nutrition in my undergraduate studies as an animal science major, and on my own after graduating with my degree in veterinary medicine, than I ever learned in veterinary school. I vaguely remember a discussion about balancing diets (which I never do in the real world of practice), but not much else.

THE BIG COMPANY BIAS

As a veterinary student, I was given a

really wonderful book on small animal nutrition. It contained a lot of great basic nutrition information, but there was a bias in the writing. While the medical facts themselves were factual, correct and unbiased, the authors were researchers from Hill's (the makers of Science Diets and Prescription Diets), so they were quick to promote their own line of pet food.

In addition to providing course materials for veterinary students, Hill's,

IAMS, Purina, and other well-known manufacturers offer additional perks for students. Purina, for example, provides several wonderful monographs on a variety of topics, including radiology, cytology, bone marrow disorders, and urinary problems. These pet food companies provide the diets used in veterinary hospitals to feed patients, and also offer these products free or at a greatly reduced price to students and staff.

A MORE BALANCED APPROACH

While I'm certainly not opposed to good marketing, there is no question that without a balanced approach from the companies that market themselves as makers of "natural" foods, the doctors graduating from veterinary schools are biased at best. At worst, they are very "anti-natural" and rabid fans of these national brands.

Doctors must strike out on their own to seek a more balanced approach to diet and nutrition. But they're are not inclined to do this unless they are driven to expand beyond conventional medicine. Since most are satisfied with the status quo, it is hard to find a veterinarian who is not afraid to challenge his long-held beliefs and actually look at other dietary and nutritional options for his patients.

THE PRESCRIPTION DIET CONNECTION

One of the concerns many doctors and their clients face is how to feed animals with medical problems. Are the so-called "prescription diets" of any value?

Again, these diets are typically made by the well known pet food companies, including IAMS, Hill's, Purina, and Waltham. The concept behind the diets is medically sound. Since the animal has a medical problem, such as kidney, liver, heart, or gastrointestinal disease, it makes sense that feeding the proper diet should help him improve during the treatment for the disorder.

The first prescription diet was made back in the good old days by Dr. Mark

Morris (the founder of Hill's) for cats with kidney disease. Dr. Morris was years ahead of his colleagues and appreciated the fact that diet can have positive or negative effects on animals with disease. Unfortunately, the quality of these prescription foods has declined drastically since Dr. Morris first prepared his diets many years ago. Most well known pet food companies have been sold to mega conglomerates like Colgate-Palmolive, who often add plant and animal by-products and various chemical preservatives, additives, flavorings, and colorings to the products. While the science behind the diets remains valid (less protein for animals with kidney disease, less fat and more easily digestible carbohydrates and proteins for those with GI disease, etc.), using by-products and chemicals does nothing to improve the health of the patient and can even contribute to illness.

Having said all this, I will occasionally use a prescription-type diet for an animal with a chronic illness if his caregiver cannot prepare a similar diet at home. For some animals, I think the benefits of these diets do outweigh the negatives. Whenever possible, though, I prefer to use them for a short period only, ultimately switching to a more natural diet for longer term control of the problem.

I would love to see a manufacturer of natural foods make diets for animals with health conditions and market them to veterinarians and consumers. Until then, read up on good nutrition for dogs and cats and search out a holistic vet who can help you make wholesome dietary choices for your companion. 

VETERINARIAN DR. SHAWN MESSONNIER IS THE AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING *THE NATURAL HEALTH BIBLE FOR DOGS AND CATS*, *THE NATURAL VET'S GUIDE TO PREVENTING AND TREATING CANCER IN DOGS*, AND *8 WEEKS TO A HEALTHY DOG*. HE IS ALSO THE PET CARE EXPERT FOR MARTHA STEWART LIVING'S PROGRAM, "DR. SHAWN - THE NATURAL VET", ON SIRIUS SATELLITE RADIO. HIS VETERINARY PRACTICE, PAWS & CLAWS ANIMAL HOSPITAL (WWW.PETCARENATURALLY.COM), IS LOCATED IN PLANO, TEXAS.

Things to remember when a diet is recommended to you:

- Most veterinarians (and few pet store employees) do not have any significant training in pet nutrition.
- Veterinarians often know nothing more about nutrition than the small amount they were taught in veterinary school. The textbooks and other nutritional information provided to students and veterinarians at continuing education seminars usually come from pet food companies that do not make "natural" diets.
- The majority of pet foods on the market contain animal and plant by-products, chemical preservatives, additives, and many artificial ingredients. These are not as healthy as those that contain wholesome meats, vegetables, and more natural preservatives.
- Prescription diets are usually no better than non-prescription diets when it comes to the quality of ingredients. Whenever possible, homemade diets are preferred for animals with various ailments. If necessary, prescription diets (plus a lot of nutritional supplements) may be given to some patients, but are best used for a short time while the animal heals.