



FREE GUIDE

Dog nutrition basics

What's actually in the bowl, explained simply

Introduction

Pet food marketing is designed to be confusing — "premium," "natural," and "holistic" aren't regulated terms and don't tell you much. This guide skips the marketing language and covers what actually matters: how to evaluate a food, how much to feed, and the real answers to the questions that come up most.

What actually matters on the label

Look for an AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) statement confirming the food is "complete and balanced" for your dog's life stage — this is the single most useful line on any bag, more useful than the ingredient list's order (which is by weight, including water content, and easy to game). A named protein source as the first ingredient ("chicken," not "meat by-products" alone) is a reasonable quality signal, but isn't the whole picture.

Life stage matters more than breed-specific marketing

Puppy, adult, and senior formulas differ in calorie density and calcium/phosphorus ratios for a real physiological reason — a large-breed puppy fed an adult-calorie-dense food can develop skeletal problems from growing too fast. Breed-specific formulas are mostly marketing; life-stage-appropriate formulas are not.

How much to actually feed

Bag feeding charts are a starting point, not a rule — they're calibrated to an average dog of that weight, and your dog's actual activity level, metabolism, and body condition matter more. The better method: feel your dog's ribs (you should feel them easily without heavy pressure, but not see them), and adjust portions up or down over a couple of weeks based on that, not the bag alone.

Common questions, answered directly

Grain-free isn't automatically healthier — the FDA has investigated a potential link between certain grain-free, legume-heavy diets and a heart condition (DCM) in some dogs; grain-free is only worth choosing for a diagnosed grain allergy, which is genuinely uncommon. Table scraps aren't inherently bad, but should stay under 10% of daily calories and never include the toxic foods covered in our food-safety article. Switching foods should happen gradually over 7-10 days, mixing in increasing amounts of the new food, to avoid stomach upset.

Nutrition basics checklist

- ☐ Food has an AAFCO 'complete and balanced' statement for the right life stage
- ☐ Feeding puppy/adult/senior-appropriate formula, not just going by breed marketing

- ☐ Portioning by body condition (feeling ribs), not just the bag chart alone
- ☐ Not choosing grain-free without a diagnosed reason to
- ☐ Any food switch happens gradually over 7-10 days
- ☐ Table scraps, if any, stay under 10% of daily calories and avoid toxic foods

Summary

Good nutrition is less about finding a magic premium bag and more about matching life stage, portioning by your actual dog's body condition, and ignoring unregulated marketing language.

This guide is for general education only and is not a substitute for advice from a certified trainer, veterinarian, or veterinary behaviorist. If you're seeing signs of distress, aggression, or a sudden change in behavior, please consult a professional who can assess your pet directly.