



Fido Files: RX Vet Diets and Breed Specific Diets - Part 3 of a 3 Part Series on Nutrition

For the conclusion of our series on pet nutrition I would like to discuss the pros and cons of vet foods (prescription diets) and breed specific diets.

What are Prescription Diets?

In short, a prescription diet is a pet food sold by your veterinarian that is usually based on some medically sound concept, such as – low protein for dogs or cats in the final stages of renal failure.

At one time the quality of these foods were not bad, but unfortunately, since large corporations such as Colgate-Palmolive have purchased these companies the quality has declined significantly. To keep costs down chemical additives, colours and preservatives have been added to the food as well as an over-abundance of species inappropriate ingredients like corn, soy or wheat.

Veterinarian Dr. Shawn Messonnier makes note in his article, “What do vets learn about nutrition” that as a vet student many of the course materials they received on animal nutrition were provided by Hills, IAMS, Purina and other well known manufacturers of pet food.

He goes on to say that although much of the course materials are based on medically sound ideas and they are unbiased, “the authors were researchers from Hills (the makers of Science Diets and Prescription Diets), so they were quick to promote their own line of pet food”. In addition to this “these pet food companies provide the diets used in veterinary hospitals” and vet students/staff were offered perks by these companies in the form of free products. He also mentions that doctors of veterinary medicine leave school “biased at best” and “anti-natural and rabid fans of these national brands”.

Doctor Messonnier encourages veterinarians to “strike out on their own to seek a more balanced approach to diet and nutrition.” Luckily, we are starting to see an increase in veterinarians that are doing this – and we have a few really good ones in Calgary.

What should you do if a Vet Diet is recommended to you?

Dr. Messonnier offers a few things to remember:

1. Most vets (and few pet store employees) have any significant training in pet nutrition.
2. Vets often know nothing more about nutrition than the small amount they are taught in school – usually provided by pet food companies that do not make “natural diets”.
3. The majority of pet foods on the market contain animal and plant by-products, chemical preservatives, additives, and many artificial ingredients. Look for healthier foods that contain wholesome meats, veggies, and natural preservatives.
4. RX diets are usually no better than non-RX diets when it comes to the quality of the ingredients.



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5. When possible, homemade diets are preferred for animals with various ailments. If necessary, RX diets (plus a lot of supplements) may be given to some patients, but are best for short term use while the animal heals.

What are Breed Specific Diets?

Some pet food companies offer specific diets for a particular breed of dog or cat. In my experience, these companies do a fantastic job of identifying the problems that certain breeds of dogs and cats may experience. For example, one popular breed specific diet for Boxers recognizes that Boxers are prone to heart problems and add supplements to help combat them. However, just like most prescription diets the basis for these diets are often nutritionally inferior to more natural, species appropriate diets. They often contain extremely minimal amounts of the supplements they advertise on the bag.

In Conclusion

The majority of vet and breed specific diets I have seen while they may have some medically sound ideas, the quality of the food may be the nutritional equivalent of adding a vitamin supplement to your macaroni and cheese diet (use the label reading guidelines in part one to see for yourself).

See if your vet can offer you home made diets to prepare until your pet is back on track. Or, often times you can find a more natural food option and a supplement that will perform the same function as your veterinary or breed specific diet. That way, you are not trading one medical problem for another. Do your research (because of limited GOOD research on pet diets, I often research human studies and use that info with my pets) and if necessary seek another opinion.

I am eagerly waiting for the day when research on pet food nutrition will become more factual and unbiased, and we can have a designation such as "pet food nutritionist" for professionals that is taught based on fact rather than clever marketing. Imagine being able to send your pet to a nutrition specialist for their medical problems, just like we do for ourselves!

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The info in this article in no way replaces regular veterinary care and advice given by a qualified veterinarian. Much of the information referenced in this article in regards to prescription diets is cited from the article "What do vets learn about nutrition?" (Animal Wellness Annual 07 Pet Food Report) written by Dr. Shawn Messonnier – the author of several books including "The Natural Health Bible for Dogs and Cats".