Let’s admit it. Many of us think as much of our pets as we do of our family. That’s why it is so important that you make choices for your animals that will safeguard their health. When the labels say “natural,” “gluten-free” and “beef flavoring,” how do you sort what is best for your pet?

When we are choosing foods for ourselves, we are taught to read the food labels. I’ll tell you to do the same when it comes to your pet’s food.

There are two different types of labels on pet food (just like on people food): the nutrition label and the ingredient label.

The ingredients in pet food are listed in descending order according to weight in the product. So whatever is listed first is the ingredient that is in greatest quantity in the food. Animals need protein. Make sure that you choose a product that lists protein first on the label.

Don’t be concerned because the label says chicken or beef meal. Meal is a protein source, such as beef, chicken or lamb that is dehydrated then ground up. So it makes sense that if it lists chicken meal on the label, you’ll actually get more protein than if you have fresh chicken, which is 80 percent water. If beef, chicken or lamb meal is the first thing on the label, you’ll make sure that your dog is getting lots of good protein. Grains are usually in the formulation for dry dog food. Make sure the grains are whole grains for better nutrition. That’s another recommendation that is important to both your diet and that of your pooch.

Determine the source of any fat in the formulation. Make sure it is labeled as “chicken fat” or “beef fat” rather than animal fat. Listing a specific fat tells us that the manufacturer has taken care with all the ingredients in the formulation rather than just buying whatever is cheapest this week.

Flavorings are another much advertised option. Flavorings make the food more palatable. However, if there is enough protein in the food, the flavorings are probably not
necessary. If you have a choice, opt for beef (or chicken or lamb) flavoring rather than the more generic meat flavoring.

Check out the guaranteed analysis, the equivalent of the nutrition label. This contains the labeled percentages of crude protein, fat, fiber and moisture. Choose those that are high in protein, low in fat and high in fiber.

Animals can have a problem with portion control, so check out the serving size on the label. If your animal is more active, the serving can be a little larger. Be sure to check the recommendations from the label with your vet so you’ll know exactly how much your dog should eat per day.

Just like people food, sometimes pet food is recalled because of contaminants that might be present in the food. Recently Bravo pet foods recalled food that might be contaminated with listeria. Last month, Purina recalled food because it didn’t have the correct amount of vitamins and minerals. If you’d like to know what pet foods have been recalled, check out www.dogfoodadvisor.com/dog-food-recalls/ or www.avma.org/news/issues/recalls-alerts/pages/pet-food-safety-recalls-alerts.aspx.

Remember that your vet is the final authority on what is good for your pet or not. Take his or her advice on what to feed and how much. Don’t buy substandard food that will cost less but cause health problems for your pet. Sometimes it is a good idea to pay a little more and get a quality product.

You are what you eat. That goes for you and your animals. A healthy diet will save money in vet bills and make for a happier pet.

**Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.**

- 30 -