

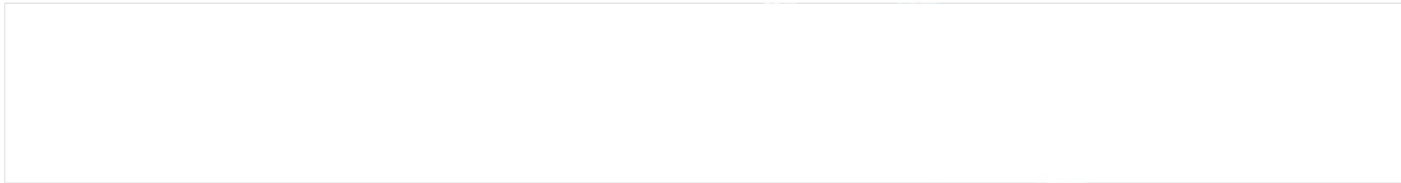


# Pet Nutrition Conversations

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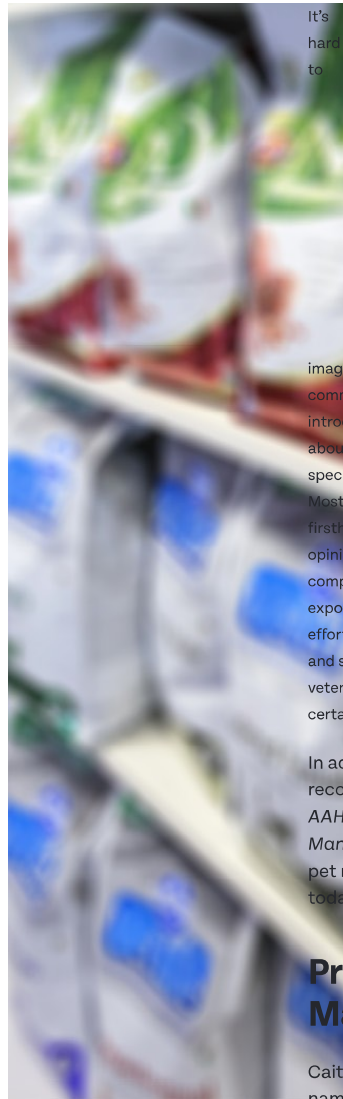


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## Recognizing Spin, Using Reputable Tools, and Making Complicated Pet Food Recommendations

by Roxanne Hawn





It's  
hard  
to



## AAHA Nutrition Guidelines Online

Read the latest guidelines from AAHA on nutrition, the *2021 AAHA Nutrition and Weight Management Guidelines* at [aaha.org/nutrition/](https://aaha.org/nutrition/).

Imagine a world without readily available commercial pet foods. When first introduced, maybe consumers' perceptions about benefits or costs of ready-to-eat, pet-specific foods stirred controversy then too. Most of us aren't old enough to remember it firsthand. More likely, though, consumers' opinions about feeding pets got more complicated as pet food options grew exponentially—with high-dollar marketing efforts to match. Amid so many headlines and so much chatter online and in print, veterinary teams stepping in are certainly more complex than it used to be.

In addition to following recommendations from the *2021 AAHA Nutrition and Weight Management Guidelines*, here's how the pet nutrition conversation looks today.

### Predatory Marketing

Caitlin Marie, DVM (an online pen name used to prevent doxing and

harassment), graduated from veterinary school in spring 2022 and started working in small animal practice in Florida over the summer. However, she began writing about information literacy and science communication while in school, including the contentious canine dilated cardiomyopathy issue. After graduation, she updated the site's name and URL from Doc of All Trades to [All Trades DVM](https://AllTradesDVM.com).

"I think the biggest thing right now for nutrition is connecting with clients about it," Marie said. "Clients often recognize that nutrition is important for their pet's health, but they aren't always equipped with the right tools and resources to try and sort out reliable information from some of the predatory marketing that's out there." Here's where you can start.

**Credentials and evidence.** Help people understand legitimate pet nutrition credentials and evidence since those less familiar with the veterinary field may be swayed by spin and false promises about pets' health and longevity. For example, Marie recommends The SkeptVet site for a thorough book review of *The Forever Dog* that's getting so much attention. Also, beware that early information out of the Dog Aging Project notes a positive association with once-a-day feeding. Without appropriate caveats, headlines blared and spread via social media as dogs fed this way "live longer"—causing people who feed their dogs two or three times a day to doubt themselves even though the information is preliminary and needs further study.

**Reputable information.** Point people to reputable pet food sites, such as the Petfoodology blog from the veterinary nutrition team at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. Marie said, "It's a really credible source coming from people who know better than pretty much anyone else what they're talking about. It's always written in a way that's really accessible for someone at any level."

**Marketing and merchandising.** Industry insiders and publications for pet food retailers and ingredient suppliers see a “profitable market” for certain ingredient categories, including those implicated in some DCM cases. They offer tactics for “overcoming hesitations” about switching from kibble to raw foods and for setting up and placing raw pet food displays for the best merchandising and conversations with consumers to ramp up sales aggressively and quickly.

**Higher price points.** In many cases, newer pet diets cost more—both because higher moisture content requires more food to meet pets’ calorie needs and because higher pricing implies better quality. “It’s actually marketing strategy to put a higher price tag on something,” Marie said.

**Budgets, sketchy promises, and guilt.** Consumers often find themselves facing budgetary drama since expensive pet foods make it harder for families to afford veterinary care. “My experience has been people coming in and saying, ‘I don’t have \$500 for this bill. I spend \$150 a month on dog food,’” Marie said. “There is this perception among a lot of people that if you’re putting out all this money for this pet food, your dog will be so healthy, you’ll never need to visit the vet. Honestly, it’s kind of sad to me that people are sold on this idea that if you do all of the right things, this will keep your dog safe, or it will keep your dog healthy. It ends up putting a lot of guilt on the shoulders of consumers who maybe can’t afford this expensive diet. Now they feel like their dog only lived to be 14 or only lived to be 15 but could have been 18 if he had been eating this diet they couldn’t afford. And, in reality, that may not have been the case. We don’t have enough evidence to say those diets would have made such a big difference. That’s such a terrible weight to put on somebody’s shoulders. It’s really frustrating. To me, that’s another aspect that feels predatory.”

## Top Tools to Use



By implementing nutritional assessments in daily practice, veterinary teams can empower pet-loving families so that they don’t fall prey to hype, sciencey-sounding information, and marketing and merchandising ploys.

To support this process outlined in the guidelines, use free, online resources from the Pet Nutrition Alliance (PNI), which is a consortium of nine veterinary organizations founded upon the principle of advancing pet health through proper nutrition. This includes preventing or addressing obesity, which remains the top nutrition-related health concern for pets, dating back decades now.

Kara Burns, MS, MEd, LVT, VTS (Nutrition), PNI president, said, “Is that the same old, same old? Maybe, but we’re not really making a dent, so it’s as important as ever. Not every veterinary healthcare team member knows how to calculate the proper amount to feed, and that’s what our calorie calculators help do. It’s designed to aid the veterinary healthcare team in making assessments and recommendations.”

Those recommendations need to be specific, including brand, product within the brand, type of food (wet, dry, etc.), the precise amount to feed, and how often. It’s a bit easier now that pet food labeling requirements include calories.

Burns makes clear that the calculations behind the free, online tools come from board-certified veterinary nutritionists who “dived into the best calculations and how best to do that for dogs and for cats—there’s some super intelligence behind this.”

Also, explaining the reasons behind pet nutritional recommendations supports adherence to those recommendations. It helps people to understand why you trust certain brands or what data backs up the use of a specific diet. Ask your industry reps for data that supports the benefits of various diets, such as measures of clinical improvement, slowed disease progression, and the like.

“It comes down to confidence,” Burns said. “It comes down to knowledge, but even before knowledge, it comes down to time. Does the team have time? Have they made time to talk about nutrition? Do they have the confidence in themselves? What am I going to say? How am I going to handle this objection?”



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“Clients often recognize that nutrition is important for their pet’s health, but they aren’t always equipped with the right tools and resources to try and sort out reliable information from some of the predatory marketing that’s out there.”

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#### —CAITLIN MARIE, DVM

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Whether it’s CBD-infused treats yesterday, mushroom-based supplements today, and who knows what else tomorrow, Burns suggested finding points of shared understanding, including what people hope to accomplish with various choices of foods and supplements or hope to avoid or correct by ruling out foods with certain ingredients. Be aware that people may feel judged by friends, at the dog park, or at the local boutique for feeding a commercial kibble or certain brands, like that’s somehow a dirty secret and wrong.

Veterinary teams also enjoy free access to another PNI resource called “Dare to Ask,” where the organization surveyed pet food companies. The tool shows which companies replied, how they answered key questions, and more importantly who ignored or refused to provide information. That intel serves as a reality check for some people since many newer pet food makers market themselves as highly transparent.

Dare to Ask protocol questions include things like:

- Is nutritional adequacy determined by formulation or feeding trials?
- Does the manufacturer employ a full-time, qualified nutritionist?
- Do they own their own manufacturing plants?

## Senior Pets with Comorbidities

Most research and pet nutrition formulations focus on life stage or singular diseases or conditions. Yet, Association of American Feed Control Officials

(AAFCO) guidelines don't include requirements for the nutritional needs of senior or geriatric pets. That doesn't mean, though, that companies don't already market various foods for this population of aging pets. When veterinary teams monitor senior pets with comorbidities, the nutrition recommendation puzzle gets more complicated.

With so many possible combinations of diseases with potentially conflicting nutritional management, Julie Churchill, DVM, PhD, DACVN, professor, department of veterinary clinical sciences, offered the disclaimer about how "very little research" looks at comorbidities since each combination "would be a very small population."

Churchill coauthored a paper entitled "Senior Pet Nutrition and Management" in 2021 that outlines several considerations. She begins, however, by clarifying that age itself is not a disease and yet risk factors for disease increase with age. She also points out that consumers likely don't understand what "complete and balanced" diets mean. She thinks of meeting each pet's baseline nutritional needs "sort of like infant formula," a comparison often easier for families to understand.

That's step one. Finding the nutritional foundation, then building from there for the comorbidities older pets face. Churchill weighs considerations like these:

- What did I learn about this specific patient?
- When assessing each pet, what are the nutrients of concern for each condition?
- Is each disease or condition acute or chronic and are there means other than nutrition for treatment?
- Which ones are changing rapidly or are progressive, and can nutritional changes help stabilize or slow the progression?
- Which one is most impacting quality of life?

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"It comes down to knowledge, but even before knowledge, it comes down to time. Does the team have time? Have they made time to talk about nutrition?"

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### **—KARA BURNS, MS, MED, LVT, VTS (NUTRITION)**

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"I don't just want to feed this diet if the patient won't eat it and the client can't afford it," Churchill said. "If it's making everybody miserable, that's a fail from the start, so it's a bit of a juggling act. But I want to sort of lay out and meet the species and life-stage needs, lay out the conditions, and then really ask myself, 'What is that doing to the patient? Is it rapidly progressing? Is it slow and chronic? Is it stable?' And then I prioritize the ones that are most dynamic and are damaging or impairing quality of life."

For example, consider a senior cat with both diabetes and kidney disease. Both conditions can be acute or chronic. Both can result in hospitalization. Yet their typical nutritional recommendations fall in contrast to each other. Churchill explained the differentials: "One, we can manage with insulin, so there's a medical avenue. With kidney disease, there is really not a medical avenue. It is nutrition. And for diabetes, high protein/low carb is nice-to-have but not need-to-have because I have insulin. I'd like them to be optimal weight, but we're not going to worry about that yet. And I want them to have reliable, predictable intake because nothing is more stressful to the client than deciding, 'do I give insulin or do I not because they're not going to eat?' So I'm going to prioritize the quality of life and ability to manage diabetes with reliable, predictable intake rate. Then, for kidney disease, I want to see whatever I can do to slow the progression of renal disease, so maybe I might not be as restrictive if that impairs intake. I try to find that sweet spot."

On the canine side of things, consider an obese dog with arthritis and mobility issues just diagnosed with kidney disease. Initially, Churchill likely settles for the patient not gaining any more weight or slows weight loss to a "glacial pace" while working to get the kidney disease under control.

Churchill summed up her strategy as "Where can I do benefit and not do harm?"

## Topics Heating Up

Other topics in the pet nutrition world gaining steam include meat-free foods and those with insect-based proteins such as crickets, as food supply concerns grow with greater populations of people and pets in the world. Expect more insights into the gut microbiome and its effect on health and response to nutritional changes as research in the field expands.

In addition, market research finds that younger pet owners feel less loyal to brands, which spurs them to switch foods more often. That detail alone supports doing frequent, routine nutritional assessments for all patients, including any supplements or treats (functional or otherwise) pets receive.

Churchill said, "There are so many great products in this country. I would rather spend my time helping you pick the right food for your pet than trying to fix a food that's less than ideal [through supplements]. Pets are individuals just like people, and it all comes down to assessing the individual and meeting their unique needs."



**Roxanne Hawn is an award-winning writer living in Colorado.**

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