

The Pet Food Term Owners Now Avoid Like the Plague

It used to be taken as a sign of quality, but now pet parents go out of their way to avoid it. Instead, they are flocking to this other label as an indicator of healthy and worth spending a premium for.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A survey of 3,500 French and U.S. pet owners revealed their top pet food preferences are GMO-free and natural formulas
- The limited studies conducted to date on GM ingredients indicate they have some toxic effects
- Eliminating grains from your pet's diet can dramatically reduce potential exposure to GMOs
- As the popularity of natural pet foods grows, consumers are moving away from "scientifically formulated" diets
- When shopping for a commercial natural diet for your dog or cat, it's best to ignore marketing claims and instead, research the ingredients list, including where the ingredients were sourced and the process used to manufacture the product

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Not long ago, the research company Nielsen conducted a survey of over 3,500 U.S. and French consumers, ages 18 to 65, who own at least one dog or cat.¹ Using the information gathered from the surveys, Nielsen developed a set of top pet owner preferences when choosing food for their animal companions.

No. 1 Pet Owner Preference — Non-GMO

European consumers have been aware of GMOs (genetically modified organisms) for several years, and so it's no surprise that 50% of French survey respondents want to see non-GMO claims on the pet food they buy. And 33% of U.S. pet owners feel the same way.

When survey respondents evaluated thousands of real world product concepts for dog and cat foods, non-GMO ingredient claims topped the list. Almost three-quarters of all concepts preferred by both U.S. and French pet owners were non-GMO.

Among those who prefer non-GMO pet food, at least 50% said they believe GMOs are unnatural and have the potential for unknown long-term health effects. Nearly half of those surveyed said they are willing to pay more for non-GMO products than for any other product claim.

What Every Pet Owner Should Know About GMOs

If you're wondering how genetically modified ingredients affect your dog or cat, unfortunately, we still don't have a lot of specifics. However, in an article published in 2009 in the journal *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*² regarding GM foods, the authors assert:

"The results of most of the rather few studies conducted with GM foods indicate that they may cause hepatic, pancreatic, renal and reproductive effects and may alter hematological, biochemical and immunologic parameters the significance of which remains unknown.

The above results indicate that many GM foods have some common toxic effects. Therefore, further studies should be conducted in order to elucidate the mechanism dominating this action.

*Small amounts of ingested DNA may not be broken down under digestive processes and there is a possibility that this DNA may either enter the bloodstream or be excreted, especially in individuals with abnormal digestion as a result of chronic gastrointestinal disease or with immunodeficiency."*³

Veterinarian **Dr. Michael W. Fox** has also compiled an extensive list of the potential risks of genetically modified foods, including:

- The toxic insecticidal agent *Bacillus thuringiensis* is present in most GM crops in the U.S. that wind up in animal feed and pet food.
- Glufosinate and **glyphosate**, which are herbicides, are applied to millions of acres of genetically modified crops across the U.S. and other countries.

These poisons are absorbed by the crops — which are engineered to be herbicide resistant — while decimating everything else growing in the area and much of the aquatic life in nearby bodies of water.

These herbicides cause kidney damage in animals, endocrine disruption and birth defects in frogs and are lethal to many amphibians. Glyphosate has also been linked to miscarriages, premature births and Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, in humans.

- Nutritionists and other health experts increasingly are connecting the rise in human allergies, including skin conditions and inflammatory GI disorders to broader consumption of GM foods and food additives — in particular, GM soy products containing novel proteins.

Fox suspects the high number of skin and food allergies, and other allergies associated with GI disorders are caused or aggravated by these novel proteins and other contaminants in genetically modified crops.

- Independent animal feeding safety studies show adverse or unexplained effects of GM foods, including inflammation and abnormal cell growth in the GI tract, as well as in the liver, kidney, testicles, heart, pancreas and brain.
- GM crops have proven to be unstable and prone to unplanned mutations — which means we don't really know whether the food being grown from these plants is safe or nutritious.

Fox's advice to pet owners is to buy only food with USDA Organic certification. He also advises consumers to avoid all prepared foods, including cooking oils that contain **corn** and soy products, since these are the products most likely to originate from GM crops.

In addition, omit grains entirely from your carnivorous pet's diet. Corn and soy ingredients are not biologically appropriate ingredients in dog and cat food, even if they are conventionally grown.

Both these ingredients are linked to a wide variety of health problems in companion animals, including allergies, skin disorders, oral disease, inflammatory bowel disease and cystitis.

No. 2 Pet Owner Preference — Natural

The survey results also show a move toward natural pet foods and away from "scientifically formulated" brands. A majority of pet owners surveyed (65%) believe ingredients such as natural digestive enzymes provide unique health advantages.

According to Nielsen, "scientific" has become a polarizing term. It's likely that to many pet owners, the word has become synonymous with "fake" or "made in a laboratory" versus made in nature. Some actual quotes from pet owners:⁴

- "When I see the word 'scientific,' it makes me think the food has added preservatives and hormones."
- "What does 'scientifically formulated' mean? It sounds unnatural."

What Every Pet Owner Should Know About Commercially Available 'Natural' Pet Food

Because marketing gimmicks are often what sell products, it's important to carefully evaluate the differences in commercial pet foods when you're looking for a more natural diet for your dog or cat. It's never a good idea to take product packaging or marketing/advertising claims at face value.

For example, let's take a look at the first 10 ingredients in grain-free dog food formulas from three companies: Hill's, The Honest Kitchen and Darwin's Pet Food. Looking just at the names, you might think the Hill's product is the most "natural" of the three.

| Hill's® Ideal Balance™ Grain Free Natural Chicken & Potato Recipe Adult (dry processed) | The Honest Kitchen Embark™ Dog Food (dehydrated raw) | Darwin's Natural Selections™ Beef (frozen raw) |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Chicken | 1. Turkey | 1. Organic ground lean beef |
| 2. Potato | 2. Organic Flaxseed | 2. Organic beef hearts |
| 3. Yellow peas | 3. Potatoes | 3. Organic beef livers |
| 4. Pea protein concentrate | 4. Celery | 4. Organic beef kidneys |
| 5. Potato starch | 5. Spinach | 5. Organic beets |
| 6. Chicken fat | 6. Carrots | 6. Organic yellow squash |
| 7. Chicken meal | 7. Organic coconut | 7. Organic zucchini |
| 8. Dried beet pulp | 8. Apples | 8. Organic yams |
| 9. Chicken liver flavor | 9. Organic kelp | 9. Organic broccoli |
| 10. Lactic acid | 10. Eggs | 10. Organic parsley |

Clearly, The Honest Kitchen and Darwin's products contain more species appropriate, natural and organic ingredients at the top of the list than the Hill's formula. Would you prefer to offer your dog, a bit of organic flaxseed and beef heart ... or pea protein concentrate and dried beet pulp?

And marketing spin doesn't stop with the ingredient list. The vast majority of pet parents think "grain-free" dry food is the same thing as a species-appropriate, fresh food diet. The truth is, when you add up the amount of starch in the Hill's example above (potato, yellow peas, pea protein concentrate and potato starch), it constitutes the bulk of the diet. Even worse, the glycemic index of this "grain-free" food is higher than many regular dry diets containing grains!⁵

What we're learning about starch (which breaks down into sugar) as it relates to inflammation, degenerative disease and cancer, is that the body doesn't care where the sugar comes from (potatoes or peas versus rice or corn), sugar feeds a host of negative metabolic processes in a dog's body.

Now let's take a look at another extremely important feature of commercial pet food that determines the quality of the finished product — the raw ingredients.

Where Do the Ingredients Come from and How Are They Processed?

The Honest Kitchen dehydrated pet food and raw food companies like Darwin's Natural Pet Food, Raw Bistro Pet Fare and Answers, use ingredients purchased from suppliers in the human food industry. They choose many ingredients from as close to home as possible. All their foods are made with 100% human grade raw materials.

Several ethical pet food manufacturers (including those just mentioned) are made with naturally raised meat, poultry or fish sourced from USDA-inspected facilities. These animal protein sources contain neither added hormones nor antibiotics. The vegetables and fruits are organic, and their formulas are made without grains, fillers, artificial preservatives or colorings, sugar or salt.

These companies discuss their manufacturing processes, raw material sourcing and food ethics in detail on their websites because they're proud of the quality of the products they produce.

The Hill's website offers few specifics on how their ingredients are sourced. There's no mention of human grade or USDA-inspected facilities, and no mention of how the food is processed (since it's kibble in the example used above, we can assume the diet is extruded).

This of course means the food is not human grade but rendered, and is made in a pet food processing plant that is not held to the same standards as a human food facility. If you, like the Nielsen survey respondents, are interested in feeding your dog or cat a commercial pet food that has natural ingredients and no GMOs, ignore the packaging and marketing buzzwords.

Instead, carefully research not only the ingredients listed on the label, but also where those ingredients were sourced, and the process used to manufacture the finished the product.

Sources and References

¹ [Nielsen \(Archived\)](#)
² [Crit Rev Food Sci Nutr. 2009 Feb;49\(2\):164-75](#)
³ [Britannica.com August 2009 \(Archived\)](#)
⁴ [PetfoodIndustry.com, March 15, 2016](#)
⁵ [Harvard Health Publishing, April 16, 2024](#)
