

Looking for Human-Grade Pet Food? Here's Why It's Near Impossible to Find

Curiously, pet food with human-grade ingredients does exist, and it's very different from regular pet food, even so-called natural varieties. Why you won't find the words on any label and what you need to know if you're looking for this type of pet food.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Growing trends in the misnamed “natural” pet food market include diets with human-grade, grass fed and free-range ingredients, as well as limited ingredient diets
- As more pet parents consider these types of pet diets, it’s important to understand exactly what the specific terms mean (and don’t mean)
- Human-grade pet food can be difficult to find and expensive; small pet food manufacturers are typically where you'll find formulas containing human-grade ingredients
- Grass fed beef should also be grass-finished beef; free-range chickens should be pasture-raised and organic
- Limited ingredient diets should be complete and balanced per AAFCO standards (many aren’t), and should only be considered for pets with an established food intolerance

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An issue of a pet food industry journal listed popular trends in what is called the "natural" pet food market. For those who might not be aware, the term "natural" has become a meaningless marketing buzzword in both the human and pet food industries.

It appears all over processed food packages and labels, ignoring the fact that processed food cannot be natural food.

*Definition of natural: "[E]xisting in or derived from nature; not made or caused by humankind."*¹

Obviously, with rare exceptions, food that comes in a can, bag or box has been made or caused by humankind. Having said all that, let's get back to the subject of growing trends in the falsely named natural pet food market. These are:²

- Human-grade
- Grass fed or free-range
- Limited ingredient diets
- Plant-based protein
- Ancient grains

- Exotic proteins

Let's take a closer look at the first three.

Human-Grade

The term human-grade in pet food means the finished product is legally suitable and approved as nourishment for humans. It is "edible."

Feed grade, which is more or less the opposite of human-grade, is finished product unsuitable for human consumption ("inedible"). It can only be legally fed to animals (other than humans).

Feed-grade ingredients are essentially waste products of the human food industry. The bulk of these ingredients are rendered by-products derived from:

- Meat slaughtering and processing plants
- Dead animals from farms, ranches, feedlots, marketing barns, animal shelters and other facilities
- Fats, grease and other food waste from restaurants and stores

Human foods are much more rigorously regulated than foods made for animals. Unlike the loosely controlled pet food industry, the FDA and USDA regulate human foods and conduct frequent, detailed inspections of the manufacturing facilities that produce food for people.

Only pet foods made in human-grade facilities, subject to the inspections and approval necessary to have human-grade status, can be legally considered 100% human-grade. Few pet food companies can meet these criteria. Per the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO):

"A claim that something is 'human-grade' or 'human-quality' implies that the article being referred to is 'edible' for people in legally defined terms. The terms 'human grade' or 'human quality' have no legal definition.

When one or more human edible ingredients are mixed with one or more non-human edible ingredients, the edible ingredients become non-human edible.

To claim that a product composed of USDA inspected and passed chicken, plus poultry meal, which is not human edible, plus other ingredients is made with human-grade chicken is misleading without additional qualification and disclaimers in the claim because the chicken is no longer edible.

Thus, for all practical purposes, the term 'human grade' represents the product to be human edible.

For a product to be human edible, all ingredients in the product must be human edible and the product must be manufactured, packed and held in accordance with federal regulations in 21 CFR 110, Current Good Manufacturing Practice in Manufacturing, Packing, or Holding Human Food.

*If these conditions exist, then human-grade claims may be made. If these conditions do not exist, then making an unqualified claim about ingredients being human grade misbrands the product."*³

AAFCO's official reason for not allowing use of the terms "human-grade" and "human quality" on pet food packaging is because people might mistakenly or deliberately eat the food themselves.

But some small pet food manufacturers who use only human-grade ingredients wonder if it doesn't have more to do with pressure from pet food industry giants who don't want smaller operations to have a competitive advantage.

After all, the top pet food manufacturers in the world do not have a single pet food made with human edible ingredients. Whatever the reason for AAFCO labeling restrictions, relatively small pet food manufacturers are where you'll find formulas containing human grade ingredients.

Grass Fed

There's a lot of confusion around the term "grass fed," along with misuse and abuse of the term by beef producers. It's important to understand that most calves are fed grass for a certain amount of time, which allows less scrupulous producers to get away with calling their beef grass fed.

The key to a truly grass fed product is the finishing. Optimal beef is both grass fed and grass-finished. Some of the benefits of grass fed and grass-finished beef include higher levels of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) and other healthy fats. It also has a more balanced ratio of omega-3 to omega-6.

Producers of grass fed meats are allowed to define their own standards. That means they can theoretically confine their animals, give them antibiotics and hormones, and still put a grass fed label on the meat as long as the animals were also fed grass.

When shopping for grass fed beef, Dr. Mercola recommends looking for the green American Grassfed (AGA) label. No other grass fed certification offers the same comprehensive assurances as the AGA's label, and no other grass fed program ensures compliance using third-party audits. The AGA label guarantees the meat comes from animals that:

- Have been fed a 100% forage diet
- Have never been confined in a feedlot
- Have never received antibiotics or hormones
- Were born and raised on American family farms (a vast majority of the grass fed meats sold in grocery stores are imported, and without country-of-origin labeling, there's no telling where it came from or what standards were followed)

Free-Range

Like the term grass fed, the "free-range" claim is also open to interpretation, misuse and abuse. The mass-produced chicken you find in grocery stores comes from birds that have typically been raised inhumanely. The animals are stressed by their environment, which leads to susceptibility to disease and the need for antibiotics.

But when it comes to labels such as "free-range," it's a case of buyer beware, because there are loopholes that allow the commercial egg industry to call eggs from their industrial egg laying facilities "free-range." For example, a hen that is let outside into a barren lot for a few minutes each day, and is fed a diet of corn, soy, cottonseed meals and synthetic additives, can be called "free-range" because she's allowed outside.

True free-range chickens, on the other hand, roam freely outdoors on a pasture, have access to fresh air and sunshine and eat their natural diet of seeds, green plants, insects and worms. They're raised without antibiotics, synthetic hormones or synthetic pesticides.

The farms where these chickens are raised typically also practice sustainable agriculture that is good for the environment. They create a smaller carbon footprint and help replenish and preserve the land for future generations.

Limited Ingredient Diets

Limited ingredient diets are becoming popular because people are trying to avoid specific ingredients in pet food they believe their animal companion is sensitive or allergic to.

What's important to know about this category is there's no existing definition of "limited ingredient" dog or cat food. So, for example, a limited ingredient formula may have just one protein instead of several, or just one carbohydrate, or just one fat source. It might also mean the formula simply has fewer total ingredients than similar products.

There are several problems with limited ingredient pet foods, the first being they may not be nutritionally balanced, in which case the label should state the food is intended for supplemental or intermittent feeding only. This is not a diet you want to feed your pet on a regular basis.

However, if a limited ingredient diet is labeled "complete and balanced," it means the food contains the proper amounts of protein, fat, carbs and essential vitamins and minerals as determined by AAFCO, which makes it suitable for daily feeding.

Before you go the limited ingredient route to help a pet you suspect has a problem with something in his diet, consider Dr. Jean Dodds' NutriScan food intolerance test, which tests for 24 of the most common foods dogs and cats eat. The NutriScan is a salivary test that removes the guesswork involved in food elimination trials, and is great place to start in healing a pet with food sensitivities.

Independent research also shows many limited ingredient diets actually contain several other protein sources not listed on the label, so even if you think you're feeding a "hypoallergenic" or novel protein to your pet you may not be, which of course defeats the purpose of feeding the diet.

The biggest issue with limited ingredient diets is that they are usually recommended for pets with medical issues who may be responsive to novel proteins, which means the pets are sick. Feeding a highly processed diet to a sick pet isn't a good recipe for recovery, nutritionally speaking.

These ill pets would do much better on a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, novel protein homemade diet as a means of providing optimal nutrients to facilitate a healing response. Making your dog's or cat's food yourself means you can select ingredients that are human-grade, organic, grass fed and/or free-range, and you can choose exactly which ingredients go into each meal.

The only caveat is that you absolutely cannot use guesswork when preparing your pet's meals. It's crucially important that you follow recipes that are species-appropriate and nutritionally balanced.

Sources and References

¹ [English Oxford Living Dictionaries \(Archived\)](#).

² [PetfoodIndustry.com, March 17, 2017](#)

³ [AAFCO.org \(Archived\)](#).
