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Health-conscious shoppers seek same diets for pets

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The saying "I wouldn't feed that to my dog," apparently holds true for many pet owners. As more and more people are shopping for organic produce and all-natural snacks that are produced using Earth-friendly methods, they are seeking the same for Fido and Fluffy.

Packaged Facts, a Rockville-based market research firm, says sales of natural pet food in the United States reached \$1 billion in 2007. This figure represents 6 percent of total pet food sales and 50 percent growth since 2003. Packaged Facts projects the segment to grow another 16 percent by 2012, increasing to more than \$2 billion.

A plethora of new products has fueled the boom in the pet product industry. Americans spent \$43.4 billion on pet products this year (\$16.9 billion on food alone), compared to \$23 billion a decade ago.

That's a lot of Breathies Biscuits With Benefits, Newman's Own Organic Premium Turkey and Sweet Potato dog food, and Stella and Chewey's All-Natural Freeze-Dried Chicken Steaks.

Dozens of specialty product lines have hit the market recently, but mainstream stores and lines have found a place as well. The top five pet-food manufacturers have added all-natural lines in the past few years. Increasingly, natural brands can be found at Whole Foods, pet superstores and even mass marketers such as Wal-Mart.

"The same person who is looking for natural foods in his own diet is saying, 'If it is good for me, it is good for Spike,'" says Robert Ventre, president of the American Pet Products Association, a trade group.

Liora Robinson has had that philosophy for a while. After a dozen years working in the pet industry, in retail and in a veterinarian's office, Ms. Robinson opened Whole Pet Central three years ago. Her stores in Rockville and Ashburn are crammed with healthy pet items. She stocks, among others, feeding bowls free of plastics, homeopathic car sickness remedies, Earthbath eye wipes and all-natural dog wash, as well as some mainstream items.

"I wanted to have a store where anything you picked off the shelf would be healthy for your pet," she says. "I knew it existed for people; in my heart I knew it was necessary for animals."

Ms. Robinson says health-conscious pet ownership is not a trend. She says that what you put into your own body - and what you put into your pet's body - has a direct correlation with a healthy, long life.

"People are realizing that animals are not toys," she says. "They are not machinery. They need to be fed the way nature intended."

Peggy Lynn Steck of Olney goes out of her way to shop at Whole Pet Central to buy certain brands of food, including Chicken Soup for the Dog Lover's Soul and Turkey Jerky treats, for Jasmine, her Cavalier King Charles spaniel. She says the extra drive time and extra cost of all-natural food is worth it.

"It is good for her digestive health, which is really important," Ms. Steck says. "We had a Lab before who was always overweight. Jasmine is really energetic and healthy. I have noticed a big difference."

The trend toward healthier pet food no doubt has been fueled somewhat by the 2007 recall of tainted pet food, in which thousands of American pets got sick or died. But while all-natural ingredients might bring peace of mind, it is still a confusing area when it comes to labeling. Universally accepted definitions for the terms "natural" or "organic" do not exist, and regulations for the contents of all pet food formulas (both all-natural and mainstream commercial) can vary from state to state.

"At this point, we don't really know what 'whole foods' means," says Joe Wakshlag, assistant professor of clinical nutrition at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine.

His advice: Read the label. Pet food manufacturers are only required to have a few basic ingredients - the rest can vary widely. One of the current trends, adding ingredients such as berries and vegetables to pet food formulas, may look nice on the label, but actually has dubious benefits for pets, Dr. Wakshlag says.

"A good place to start [when reading labels] is what is the main source of protein?" says Dave Carter, founder of the Pet Promise brand of pet food, which features source-verified natural meat and poultry in its products.

If a label says "beef," then it is a form of beef as humans would know it. If it says "beef meal" or "beef byproducts," then the actual amount of beef might be pretty low, he says.

In the end, the natural pet movement comes down to personal preference. Just as certain humans can eat fast food every day and live to be 100, no one can say that eating well will have the same health effect for every human. Same goes for animals.

However, Dr. Wakshlag says, pets still need pet food - not a strictly "human" diet. With so many choices out there, pet owners should have no problem finding what they need.

"Some people think it is OK to feed a poodle just chicken," he says. "It is not OK. You can do a homemade diet, but call us or call your vet. To do it right, it is pretty time consuming."