

# Natural and Organic Pet Foods

*In various countries, more and more dog and cat owners are turning to natural pet food, with no slowdown in sight. Many owners believe that natural foods are healthier for their pets. Understandably, pet food manufacturers are riding the natural wave. A wide variety of natural foods can be found on the shelves at pet stores. Organic pet foods occupy one of the niches within the natural segment of the market.*

*There is legislation for using the words natural and organic on the pet food label. The term natural is allowed when no chemically synthesised substances are present in the product, except for certain additives. Pet foods labelled natural generally are not 100 percent natural, but contain some synthetic substances. Organic relates to a defined system of producing and handling plant and animal ingredients. Pet foods linked with organic usually are not composed of 100 percent organic ingredients. Nutritionally speaking, there are no systematic differences among natural, organic and other pet foods. Owners attracted by natural or organic feeding and trying to choose the best foods for their pets may be guided by their own judgement, practical experience and information on the pet food label. If desired, the pet food manufacturer may be contacted for details.*

**O**ne connotation for the term natural is present in or produced by nature. Natural pet nutrition has different meanings to different people, but the common denominator is health through foods free of artificial compounds. This makes natural a product descriptor that is easily understood. Organic pet food connects with health through eco- and livestock-friendly farming practices, but also with the pet owner's lifestyle preference. How do commercially manufactured, natural

and organic pet foods differ from non-natural and non-organic foods?

### US Market

The US pet food market is mature with relatively flat volume sales, but dollar sales are increasing due to growth of the natural, more expensive segment. Further growth is expected. Retailers are devoting more shelf space to natural foods. Mass retailers are offering lower-priced natural products and launching store brands. Manufacturers are reformulating existing

products into natural. Investment and acquisition activities related to natural brands are thriving.

Natural is the top marketing claim for US pet foods. Natural pet foods account for about 60 percent of all food sales in retail. The share of organic foods may be around 4 percent. When these percentages are combined with the self-reported owners' purchase of specialty nutrition, it follows that a substantial portion of natural food is bought unconsciously, contrary to organic food. This may be explained by natural foods being on the shelves abundantly.

### Legislation

The USA and the EU represent about 85 percent of the global pet food market. The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) and the European Pet Food Industry Federation (FEDIAF) have set definitions for natural pet foods with similarities and differences. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has defined organic pet foods. EU member states stick by national conditions for using the terms organic and bio, which are considered equivalent. In the USA and EU, competent state authorities ensure fulfilling of the stipulations.

AAFCO allows the word natural on the label when the food does not contain chemically synthetic substances. An exception is made for synthetic vitamins, minerals or trace nutrients, but when added to natural food it must be declared as a disclaimer. Natural foods do not have technical restrictions as to ingredient processing and production of the end product.

Certified, organic pet foods must comply with regulations of the USDA. Labelling standards are based on the percentage of organic plant and animal ingredients in a food. Crop must be grown without pesticides, artificial fertilisers, genetic modification, irradiation or sewage sludge. Livestock must be raised on organic feed, given access to the

outdoors, and not treated with antibiotics or hormones. As a general rule, synthetic substances are prohibited in organic production, but there is a list with allowed synthetic compounds, including chemically synthesised vitamins and minerals in livestock feed.

The labelling provisions do not extend to trademarks and names of manufacturers and brands. Some include the word natural or organic, variations on it or alternative spellings (see examples).

### Natural and Organic Versus Regular

There is no scientific evidence that natural or organic foods, when compared to normal foods, improve pet health. This is not surprising because all complete, commercial pet foods must provide sufficient nutrition for a daily ration. From a nutritional point of view, natural, organic and regular foods are all equally good.

Regular pet foods may contain synthetic preservatives, but natural foods cannot. Contrary to frozen and canned foods, dry foods require added antioxidants to prevent the fat constituent from going rancid. Natural dry foods usually contain antioxidants in the form of so-called mixed tocopherols, which are extracted from natural sources, but the process involves chemical reactions.

Production methods can be identical for natural, organic and regular foods. This also holds for the pre-processing of animal ingredients used in dry foods. Most natural pet foods are not 100 percent natural because synthetic additives are present. Organic foods can contain synthetic substances and non-organic ingredients. Thus, natural and organic pet foods may have production and composition characteristics in common with regular foods.

*Dr Beynen will be writing this exclusive column on dog and cat nutrition and nutrition-related items every month.*



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