

Tip Sheet



Deciphering the Pet Food Label

The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) establishes the nutritional standards for complete and balanced pet foods, but it does not regulate, test, approve, or certify pet foods in any way. It is the responsibility of each state and each pet food company to ensure that complete and balanced pet foods meet AAFCO's nutritional standards. The following chart lists terms commonly found on pet foods and treats, with AAFCO's nutritional standard for each term.

Term	AAFCO Definition ¹
Light/lite/low calorie*	Contains < 3,100 kcal metabolizable energy (ME)/kg for products containing < 20% moisture Contains < 2,500 kcal ME/kg for products containing 20–65% moisture Contains < 900 kcal ME/kg for products containing > 65% moisture
ME	The number of calories (kcal) in each kilogram (kg) of food 1 kcal ME = 1 calorie
Less/reduced calories[†]	The name of the product of comparison and the % calorie reduction (expressed on an equal weight basis) explicitly stated and juxtaposed with the largest or most prominent use of the claim on each panel where the term applies This regulation does not require the terms “less calories” or “reduced calories” to adhere to the “light” or “low calorie” guidelines.
Lean/low fat[§]	Contains < 9% crude fat for products containing < 20% moisture Contains < 7% crude fat for products containing 20–65% moisture Contains < 4% for products containing > 65% moisture
Less/reduced fat	Similar to the “less” or “reduced calories” rule, it is only used to compare to a previous formulation of another food.
Maintenance/weight maintenance**	Most pet food companies use the term “maintenance” to refer to AAFCO minimum guidelines for adult maintenance or all life stages maintenance.
Weight management/healthy weight/weight care/weight control	Neither an AAFCO meaning nor a legal meaning

*Water has no calories; therefore, the actual food must contain fewer calories when analyzed “as fed” in water because the water is part of the food's total weight. Thus, an ounce of dry food would appear to have more calories than an ounce of canned. If you took the water out of the canned food and compared the food left over, you would be better able to compare the two foods.

[†]In plain English, this means: When a label claims a food is “Reduced Calories” or “Less Calories,” the label must answer two questions: “How much less?” and “Compared to what?” For example: “Reduced calories! 30% fewer calories per 4-ounce serving than Bow-Wow-Chow Adult Diet for Dogs.”

[§]Fat is an important part of a healthy dog's diet. The AAFCO Nutrient Profiles require a minimum of 5% crude fat for adult maintenance dog food, which is needed to maintain weight and health in adult dogs. The regulation allows a dog food to contain up to almost double that amount. “Low fat” diets can have more fat than is recommended for growth.

**All pet foods (including all types of treats/chews, and supplements) are regulated under state law and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Because most manufactured pet foods are formulated as “complete and balanced,” based on AAFCO regulations, this term is used appropriately within the AAFCO guidelines.

Note: 1 kcal ME = 1 calorie

¹Association of American Feed Control Officials. (AAFCO) Official Publication Association of American Feed Control Officials Incorporated. Association of American Feed Control Officials, 2012.