

You Are What You Eat

It doesn't take a mastermind to know that what we eat can affect the way we think and feel. More and more people seem to be adversely affected by intolerances to certain foods – and some, like nut allergies, can even be fatal. However, few owners realize that their dog's behaviour could be adversely affected by the food they are providing. For example, eating unusual things – a behaviour called “pica” – may well be a result of dietary inadequacy or sensitivity. Dogs may chew up and eat sticks, grass, tissues or other paper products, coal, and soil, as well as fibrous material – such as carpets, if you are very unlucky!

Other dogs may appear to have boundless energy. This is great if you want to walk the dog all day or keep it active for a job of work, but some dogs can behave like over-active kids, constantly demanding attention and creating mayhem in an attempt to release pent-up energy. Such dogs can appear to be like ‘coiled springs’ – highly reactive, easily triggered into over-exuberant behaviour and slow to clam down. If your dog behaves like a whirling dervish even after a long walk, annoys your visitors by leaping at them with endless enthusiasm or pesters you continually while you try to watch TV, then a good long look at both diet and behavioural training may well be required.

Physical problems can also be related to diet and feeding. It's interesting that many dogs seem to develop sensitivities to environmental pollutants, grass or flea bites – and they are often particularly itchy around the base of the tail, the feet and belly. Of course, dogs can get itchy if they have skin conditions or parasites, so it's always important to obtain veterinary advice if your dog is scratching, or has an upset stomach. Regardless of popular belief, dogs should have a consistent digestions, and should not need to go to the loo six or seven times a day - neither should it look and smell like a herd of elephants have been there afterwards! The rule here is that the better the food is being digested, the less will need to be passed out as waste.

Of course there is a whole list of factors that can lead to behavioural and training problems in dogs. The genetic influences from the dog's breed and parents, the amount of early social contact that a puppy has with people and other dogs, and the effects of training and the environment all lead to making a dog's “personality” and overall behaviour. However, for some dogs, the direct effects of a diet that isn't suiting it can be dramatic and can over-ride all the owner's valiant attempts to train and control their family pet.

Just as some people have sensitivities to certain foods, so can dogs. Research to conclusively prove this has been problematic – simply because dogs are as individual as we are! Just because one person can eat strawberries, chocolate or cheese without getting a headache, does not mean that another can get away with it, and the same goes for our pets. However, recent studies indicate that a dog's ability to learn can be directly influences by what it eats – and this must surely make us question other possible impacts.

The effects of diet on canine health and well-being can either be very dramatic, or very subtle! This, combined with the hosts of other factors that influence our dog's behaviour make it difficult to determine exactly whether some constituents of foods are more likely to have an impact on behaviour than others, or whether it is as individual as it seems to be in humans. However, there are certain signs and symptoms that may indicate that your dog could benefit from a diet change:

- Eating unusual things, such as sticks, grass, tissues or stones
- Over activity, and over arousal
- Inconsistent digestion, or passing excessive amounts of waste
- Having bad breath, itchy skin or dandruff
- Lacking concentration and finding it hard to learn
- Becoming over-excited and taking a long time to calm down
- Being irritable or prone to ‘temper tantrums’
- Coprophagia (eating faeces). Yuk!

There are so many different foods on the market that it can be almost impossible to tell which one will suit your dog. Choosing a food comes down to personal preference in terms of practicality, but should also be governed by the quality of the food. However, there are a few guidelines that may help the next time you are scouring the shelves in the pet shop.

- Choose a food that suits your dog's age, size and lifestyle. For example, if you have a puppy, it's vital that you select a specially formulated puppy food to facilitate proper growth and development. Think about your dog's activity level, and be realistic. Feeding an adult Great Dane a food formulated for working gundogs is just asking for trouble, and just because you have a Greyhound, it doesn't mean that you have to feed a diet produced for dogs that are in training for a race!
- Look at the ingredients list on the food. By law, the contents need to be listed in order of quantity. A good quality food, which is made from an easily digested protein source will show this by listing exactly what the meat content is at the beginning.
- Beware of vague terms such as 'meat and animal derivatives'. This can denote all the parts of the meat source that is fit for human consumption, but that we wouldn't normally eat, such as feet, claws, beaks etc
- Check for unnecessary colourants, preservatives and artificial additives. Theories regarding behaviour problems in children have been linked to these for years, so avoiding feeding them to dogs seems sensible too. Bear in mind that your dog doesn't care about the colour of its food!
- If you want to know more, there are some excellent books and articles around. However, do bear in mind that much of the information available on the internet refers to countries other than the UK, where legal restrictions on manufacturing and ingredients may be different to ours.

See [Alpha Shop](#) for "The Dog's Dinner" by Val Strong.