

The safety of pet food

The role of the pet food manufacturer is to provide safe, nutritious food for pets, compliant with the EU regulation. The industry is strictly regulated by over 50 pieces of legislation and in addition to this, FEDIAF members manufacture products in line with Codes of Practice to ensure quality and safety, for instance the Guide to Good Practice for the Manufacture of Safe Pet Foods.

Ingredients

The EU regulations detail what safe ingredients and additives may be used in pet food manufacture. Pet food ingredients can be either from animal or plant origin. Many of the ingredients of animal origin used in pet food come from parts of the animal that are not consumed by humans for cultural reasons and/or eating habits, whilst perfectly safe (ex. lungs, hearts, kidneys or liver, etc.) as they have passed the veterinary inspections as fit for human consumption.

Ingredients from plant origin are often common to both human and pet nutrition (ex. maize, rice, wheat, oat, etc.); other ingredients are specific to pet food as manufacturers are looking for exact combinations of nutritional properties, especially beneficial to pets (such as vegetable fibres to stimulate the intestinal transit, pre- and probiotics to help promote a healthy digestion, etc...)

Additionally, hygienic collecting, transport and maintaining the cold chain are securing the safety of pet food ingredients.

Production facilities

Pet food and treat manufacturing facilities are designed with safety in mind to prevent product contamination and maximise security. Facility design includes use of stainless-steel manufacturing equipment, installation of handwashing stations, established walking patterns to minimise contamination, protective coatings on floors and walls, security of facility perimeter, internal area, equipment, metal detectors, limited use of glass and ingredients storage. At each critical point, the HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) methodology is used to manage the specific risk.



Wet pet food

Wet pet food generally uses animal derived and vegetable ingredients filled in cans, trays or pouches, so-called hermetically sealed, airtight packaging. After filling and sealing, the products undergo a sterilisation process under high temperatures – identical to the canning process in human food. The wet pet food is thereby sterile, meaning that no live bacteria are present – the products have a long shelf life and no preservatives need to be added during processing.

Dry pet food

Dry pet food generally uses animal derived and vegetable ingredients produced using high temperatures. The mix of dry and some fresh pet food ingredients are then processed e.g. pressed, baked or extruded (extrusion is a human food processing type, the same as for breakfast cereals, by which mixed ingredients are pressed under high pressure and heated through an opening which form the product by expansion).

Dry pet food is not packed in airtight containers and is exposed to oxygen and possibly moisture. Pet food manufacturers therefore use natural or artificial preservatives and antioxidants, as permitted by EU regulations, to maintain products shelf stable and to avoid fat getting rancid, to have molds or bacterial growth.



Foto: S. Milashevich

Raw pet food

In addition to wet and dry pet food, there is a range of commercially produced raw pet food products available in frozen or freeze-dried formats. Raw pet food products can be complete or complementary. Complete diets will also contain additional ingredients such as fruit, vegetable and sometimes herbs and additives to make them complete and balanced. In terms of preparation, animal by-products are minced, mixed and then frozen. As there is no step killing pathogens involved, more care must be taken in the process of raw pet food production.

Good hygiene practice is always important when handling pet food and even more so when handling raw products: Washing hands with hot water and soap after handling, wash and disinfect all surfaces, dishes and utensils that have been in contact with raw food, remove and carefully dispose of any uneaten raw pet food, clean and disinfect your pet's feeding area as soon as your pet has finished eating.

For more information check our fact sheet on Responsible Raw Feeding.



Instructions for use are on the pet food label

Pet food manufactures include instructions of use on the pet food label, including storage and handling requirements – these are common sense rules, like keeping products refrigerated (wet pet food after opening, raw pet food) or in cool, dry place (dry pet food). Pet owners should also check the packaging for product expiry date information.

In conclusion, pet food manufacturers, thanks to industry guidelines such as the Guide to Good Practice for the Manufacture of Safe Pet Foods and Nutritional Guidelines, control and manage the risks linked to ingredients, process or finished products and provide safe pet food to pets.

Good Manufacturing Practice

A responsible pet food manufacturer will take safety and quality very seriously and will have their own defined processes and standards that help ensure the safety and quality of their ingredients and products.

These should start with reliable suppliers and cover the whole process through to feeding the cat or dog and are likely to include:

- Selection of reliable suppliers – companies that supply ingredients are regularly inspected by responsible pet food manufacturers to gain “supplier approval”
- Defined specifications for raw materials and regular inspection and testing against these – may also require a certificate of analysis from the supplier. Presence of undesirable substances is monitored at this stage. Additives used in pet food are being subject to approval by the European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA)
- A clearly defined specification for the product that includes nutritional profile, colour, texture, digestibility and palatability and technical parameters such as moisture content. Routine testing of product against specifications
- Visual inspection of milling process
- Precise measuring of raw material quantities ensuring accuracy versus recipe
- Carefully controlled cooking temperatures and times
- Regular sampling and testing of finished products
- Recording of recipe ingredients through batch records, and of finished product pallets and their destinations to ensure traceability
- Established microbial testing routine for both finished product and manufacturing facilities
- Regular checking of packaging integrity, which may include continuous monitoring through cameras
- Metal detectors and x-ray machines to locate foreign bodies within finished product
- Verification of nutritional adequacy via analysis of raw materials and/or finished products and/or feeding studies using the FEDIAF Nutritional Guidelines



A responsible pet food manufacturer may also choose to implement external audits and voluntary certifications such as ISO 9001:2015 and ISO 14000 through an external accreditation institute (<http://www.iso.org/iso/home.htm>).

For more information about the safety and quality standards that apply to a particular product please contact the pet food manufacturer.