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Research article

How Dog and Cat Owners Judge Pet Food Quality: Nutritional Beliefs, Food-Selection Criteria and Veterinary Guidance

Sorana Daina[1], Anamaria Blaga-Petrean[2*], Daria-Antonia Dumitraș[1], Adrian Macri[1]

[1] Department of Animal Nutrition, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca, 400372 Cluj-Napoca, Romania; sorana.matei@usamvcluj.ro (S.D.); adrian.macri@usamvcluj.ro (A.M.)
[2] Department of Animal Hygiene and Welfare, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca, 400372 Cluj-Napoca, Romania, anamaria.blaga@usamvcluj.ro
* Corresponding author: anamaria.blaga@usamvcluj.ro

Abstract: Selecting appropriate pet food requires understanding nutritional information beyond ingredient claims. This study examined feeding practices, food-selection criteria, nutritional beliefs, and attitudes towards veterinary guidance among dog and cat owners in Romania, using a 44-item online questionnaire. Of 1,170 submitted questionnaires, 1,103 were retained for descriptive analysis. Although 95.5% of respondents acknowledged the importance of nutrition for animal longevity, ingredient lists were consulted considerably more often (72.2%) than analytical constituents (53.3%) or feeding instructions (23.4%). While 66.4% reported checking brand credibility, only 2.2% of 596 respondents who described their approach mentioned scientific studies or product testing. Protein source was selected as a criterion for evaluating protein quality by 69.4%, whereas just 2.4% reported requesting an amino acid profile. Grain-free products were considered healthier by 48.0%, higher-protein foods were perceived as better by 48.5%, and 52.6% associated the declaration "meat and animal derivatives" with inferior quality. Dietary adjustment after neutering was considered important by 78.9%, but only 54.4% regarded weight-management diets as useful for overweight animals. Although 68.9% had discussed their pets' diet with a veterinarian, trust in the pet food industry was reported by only 18.8%, compared with 40.2% expressing distrust. These findings highlight a gap between interest in pet nutrition and the criteria used to judge dietary quality. Veterinary counselling should emphasise nutritional adequacy, critical label interpretation, and individual dietary requirements rather than isolated ingredients or marketing claims.

Keywords: pet food labelling; nutritional knowledge; feeding practices; owner perceptions; veterinary nutritional counselling.

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1. Introduction

Nutrition plays a fundamental role in maintaining the health and well-being of dogs and cats, making dietary selection an important responsibility for pet owners [1]. Choosing an appropriate food requires consideration of nutritional adequacy, physiological requirements, and energy intake rather than brand preference alone [2]. However, the increasing diversity of commercial pet foods and the widespread availability of nutritional information have made food selection more challenging. Owners may consequently rely on ingredient composition, perceived health benefits, recommendations, and personal beliefs when evaluating products [3, 4].

Pet food labels represent an important source of information, but their interpretation requires an understanding of both nutritional principles and labelling requirements. European legislation regulates the declaration of ingredients, analytical constituents, and other mandatory product information [5], while FEDIAF provides additional guidance on labelling practices and commercial claims [6]. Nevertheless, information displayed on packaging does not always allow consumers to assess nutritional quality accurately. In particular, ingredient lists alone cannot establish nutritional adequacy and should be in-

terpreted alongside nutrient composition, energy density, and the nutritional requirements of the animal [7, 8]. A comprehensive evaluation also requires consideration of product formulation and manufacturer quality assurance practices [8].

Among the nutritional characteristics influencing food selection, protein content and ingredient origin receive particular attention [9]. Perceived nutritional quality and ingredient composition also influence purchasing decisions [10]. However, protein quality cannot be determined solely by ingredient origin or crude protein concentration, as protein digestibility and amino acid supply must also be considered [7, 11]. Furthermore, dietary protein intake should be evaluated in relation to energy density and the animal's nutritional requirements [7]. Misinterpretation may also arise from beliefs concerning cereals and grain-free formulations. Dogs possess physiological adaptations associated with starch utilisation [12], while cats can digest appropriately processed starch despite their distinct nutritional physiology [13]. Dietary composition should also be considered in relation to feeding conditions and body-weight management [14], while assessment of body condition remains important for individualised nutritional recommendations [15].

In this context, veterinary nutrition education and professional guidance are important for supporting informed dietary choices [16]. Providing consistent nutritional advice requires appropriate professional knowledge and training [17], while effective consultations should also consider owners' perceptions of nutrition and body condition [18]. Understanding the criteria used by owners to evaluate commercial pet food may therefore help veterinary professionals identify areas requiring further explanation and provide more targeted nutritional recommendations.

The objective of the present study was to evaluate food selection criteria, nutritional knowledge, and perceptions of commercial pet food among dog and cat owners in Romania, with particular emphasis on beliefs regarding nutritional quality, interpretation of food composition, and attitudes towards veterinary nutritional guidance.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study population and data collection

The study was conducted among dog and cat owners residing in Romania between October 2025 and April 2026. Data were collected using an online questionnaire developed in Google Forms and distributed through online platforms and social media groups addressed to pet owners. Participation was voluntary and respondents completed the questionnaire independently. Eligible participants were adults aged 18 years or older who resided in Romania and owned at least one dog and/or cat. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the use of the collected information for scientific purposes. Consent was requested before proceeding with the questions. No directly identifying personal information was collected. A total of 1,170 questionnaires were submitted. Following eligibility screening and the removal of duplicate or otherwise ineligible responses, 1,103 questionnaires were retained for analysis, while 67 were excluded. Each respondent was considered an individual study participant, regardless of the number or species of animals owned.

2.2. Questionnaire Design and Content

The questionnaire comprised 44 questions addressing pet ownership, feeding practices, nutritional knowledge, food-selection criteria, and perceptions of commercial pet food. It included single-choice, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to provide additional explanations where appropriate. The estimated completion time was 5–10 minutes.

The questionnaire covered six main areas: respondent characteristics and pet ownership; current feeding practices and purchasing habits; financial considerations influencing food selection; information consulted on pet food labels and purchasing criteria; perceptions of commercial pet food and trust in veterinary-associated brands; and nutritional knowledge, including protein quality, carbohydrates, grain-free diets, food allergens, specialised diets, and nutritional requirements. The analysis focused on food-selection criteria, nutritional beliefs, and perceptions of commercial pet food and veterinary guidance. Additional questions concerning food allergies, neutering, and weight management were included because of their relevance to nutritional counselling in veterinary practice. Respondents reported the feeding practices used for all pets they owned, rather than providing separate dietary information for each animal. Accordingly, the respondent was considered the unit of analysis, and the reported percentages could not be attributed to individual animals.

2.3. Data Processing and Statistical Analysis

Questionnaire responses were exported from Google Forms and processed using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft 365, Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA). Data were summarised using descriptive statistics, with categorical variables expressed as absolute frequencies (n) and percentages (%), calculated based on the number of valid responses for each question. For multiple-response questions, each selected option was considered separately; therefore, cumulative percentages could exceed 100%. Open-ended responses were classified into thematic categories according to their content and summarised using frequencies and percentages. The analysis focused on feeding practices, food-selection criteria, nutritional knowledge, and perceptions of commercial pet food and veterinary guidance. No inferential statistical tests were performed.

3. Results

A total of 1,103 valid questionnaires were included in the analysis. Among respondents, 45.2% owned only dogs, 6.4% owned only cats, and 48.4% owned both species. Dry food was the most frequently reported feeding option, followed by a combination of dry and wet food, while diets incorporating home-prepared food were less common (Table 1). Pet food was purchased primarily online or from specialised pet stores.

Table 1. Pet ownership, feeding practices, and pet food purchasing channels

Variable	Category	Respondents (%)
Pet ownership	Dogs only	45.2
	Cats only	6.4
	Both dogs and cats	48.4
Feeding practices	Dry food	61.7
	Combination of dry and wet food	18.8
	Commercial and home-prepared food	9.2
	Raw/BARF diet	4.9
	Exclusively home-prepared food	3.7
Purchasing channels	Online retailers	51.1
	Specialised pet stores	37.4
	Supermarkets	19.4
	Veterinary clinics	10.2

When evaluating protein quantity, respondents relied more frequently on ingredient-related criteria than on the protein-to-energy ratio. Similarly, protein source was the most frequently selected criterion for assessing protein quality, whereas requesting an amino acid profile from manufacturers was rarely reported (Table 2). Additionally, 19.6% of respondents reported not assessing protein quantity, while 22.1% did not evaluate protein quality.

Table 2. Criteria used by respondents to evaluate dietary protein.

Evaluation criterion	Respondents (%)
Protein quantity	
Protein source (animal vs. plant)	53.4
Declared crude protein content	46.2
Position of animal-derived ingredients	42.8
Protein-to-energy ratio	11.2
Protein quality	
Protein source	69.4
Crude ash content	29.6
Protein-to-phosphorus ratio	9.3
Amino acid profile requested from manufacturer	2.4

Ingredient lists were the most frequently consulted element of pet food packaging, whereas feeding instructions received considerably less attention (Figure 1). Recommendations from trusted individuals

(55.1%) and food palatability (50.5%) were among the main factors influencing purchasing decisions. Although 66.4% of respondents reported checking brand credibility before purchasing, the methods used varied considerably. Among the 596 respondents who provided further details, 53.5% referred to ingredient composition or analytical constituents, 35.6% relied on reviews or recommendations, and only 2.2% mentioned consulting scientific studies or product testing.

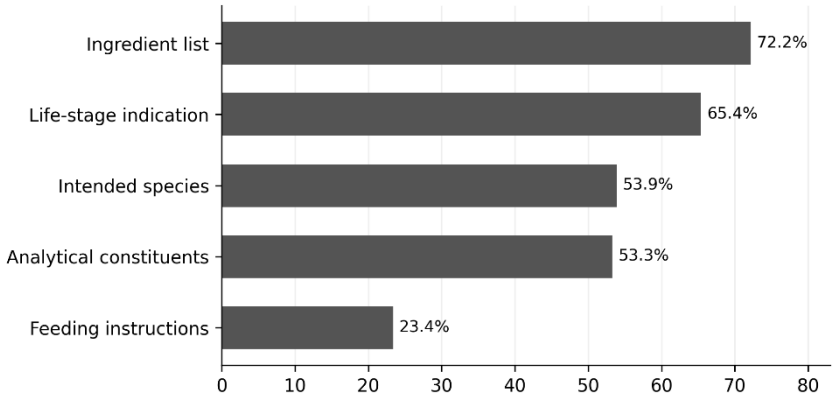


Figure 1. Information consulted on commercial pet food packaging.

Respondents expressed differing beliefs regarding pet food composition (Figure 2). Nearly half believed that grain-free diets were healthier (48.0%) or that higher protein content indicated better nutritional quality (48.5%). Furthermore, 52.6% considered the declaration "meat and animal derivatives" an indicator of lower food quality, whereas 40.8% disagreed. Uncertainty was most pronounced regarding low-carbohydrate diets, with 41.6% of respondents selecting "do not know."

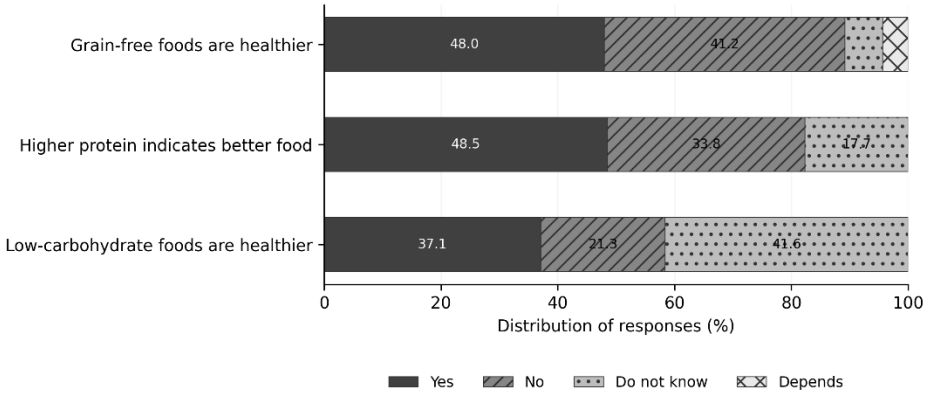


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents' beliefs regarding grain-free, high-protein, and low-carbohydrate pet foods.

Table 3. Owners' knowledge and perceptions regarding individual dietary needs and food allergies

Question / domain	Reported response	Respondents (%)
Individual dietary needs		
Dietary adjustment after neutering	Considered important	78.9
Weight management in overweight animals	Specific diet considered useful	54.4
Food allergies and hypoallergenic diets		
Common food allergens in dogs	Does not know	40.8
Common food allergens in cats	Does not know	60.2
Regulatory status of "hypoallergenic"	Does not know	43.2
Hypoallergenic diets considered generally better	No	57.5
	Yes	27.6

Although 95.5% of respondents agreed that nutrition contributes to animal longevity, responses concerning specific nutritional needs varied. Most considered dietary adjustment after neutering important, whereas only slightly more than half regarded weight-management diets as useful for overweight animals (Table 3). Considerable uncertainty was also observed regarding common food allergens and the regulatory

status of the term "hypoallergenic". Among the 554 respondents who provided an open-ended definition of a hypoallergenic diet, only 2.0% specifically mentioned hydrolysed proteins.

Discussion of pet nutrition with a veterinarian was reported by 68.9% of respondents. Among the 342 explanations provided by those who had not discussed their pets' diet with a veterinarian, the most frequently reported reasons were considering such discussions unnecessary (19.6%), the topic not having been addressed (19.3%), and distrust of veterinarians (17.8%). Additionally, 9.6% questioned veterinarians' expertise in nutrition.

Attitudes towards commercial pet food and veterinary-associated brands also varied considerably (Table 4). Neutrality and distrust predominated in perceptions of the pet food industry, while opinions regarding veterinary-associated brands remained divided. These findings reflect respondents' perceptions of commercial products and brands and should not be interpreted as direct measures of trust in individual veterinary professionals.

Table 4. Veterinary communication and perceptions of commercial pet food

D**omain**	**Response**	**Respondents (%)**
Dietary discussion with a veterinarian	Yes	68.9
	No	31.1
Trust in the pet food industry	Trust	18.8
	Neutral	41.1
	Distrust	40.2
Commercial pet food considered healthy	Yes	29.2
	No	33.6
	Do not know	28.7
	Depends	8.5
Trust in veterinary-associated brands	Yes	49.1
	No	41.4
	Do not know	4.8
	Depends	4.6

4. Discussion

The findings revealed a discrepancy between owners' interest in pet nutrition and their understanding of specific nutritional concepts. Although 95.5% recognised the importance of nutrition for animal longevity, food selection frequently relied on ingredient-related information, recommendations, and perceived product quality. Commercial dry food was the predominant feeding option (61.7%), followed by combined dry and wet feeding (18.8%). In comparison, O'Halloran et al. [4], in a survey involving 1,172 cat owners, reported that 60.1% provided a combination of wet and dry food, whereas 16.1% used dry food exclusively. These differences may partly reflect the populations investigated, as the present questionnaire included owners of both dogs and cats. Nevertheless, both studies illustrate the importance of commercial diets in companion animal feeding practices.

Ingredient lists were consulted by 72.2% of respondents, compared with 53.3% who examined analytical constituents and only 23.4% who considered feeding instructions. Similarly, Schleicher et al. [10], in a survey of 2,181 pet owners, identified health, nutritional quality, ingredients, and freshness among the most important purchasing considerations. Vinassa et al. [3] also reported that natural ingredients received the highest importance score (4.3 out of 5) among 935 Italian pet owners. These findings are consistent with the broader evidence synthesised by Ai et al. [1], indicating that food composition and perceived quality are important determinants of purchasing decisions. Interestingly, although 66.4% of our respondents reported checking brand credibility, only 2.2% of the 596 participants who explained their verification methods mentioned scientific studies or product testing. This distinction is relevant because ingredient declarations alone cannot establish nutritional adequacy or manufacturing quality-control practices, as emphasised by WSAVA guidance [8]. Furthermore, discrepancies between declared and analytically identified ingredients have been documented in certain commercial pet foods [19], while analyses of puppy and cat foods have demonstrated variability in nutritional composition [20, 21].

Protein-related responses further illustrated the importance attributed to ingredient identity. Protein source was selected by 53.4% when evaluating protein quantity and by 69.4% when assessing protein quality, whereas only 11.2% considered the protein-to-energy ratio and 2.4% reported requesting an amino acid profile. Comparable findings were reported by Singh et al. [9] in a study involving 691 dog owners in the United States, where approximately 30% associated protein quality with protein quantity and only 18% correctly related protein quality to indispensable amino acid requirements. These observations highlight the distinction between perceived and nutritional definitions of protein quality. In practice, crude protein concentration and ingredient origin must be interpreted alongside amino acid composition, digestibility, energy density, and the animal's nutritional requirements [7]. Differences in protein utilisation between dogs and cats further emphasise the complexity of this assessment [11].

Simplified beliefs concerning food composition were also common. Nearly half of respondents considered grain-free diets healthier (48.0%) or believed that higher protein content indicated better nutritional quality (48.5%), while 52.6% associated the declaration "meat and animal derivatives" with inferior food quality. In a larger survey involving 8,823 respondents, Godglück et al. [2] reported that meat content was considered the most important food quality characteristic by 56.4% of dog owners and 71.2% of cat owners. However, neither the absence of cereals nor a higher protein concentration independently establishes nutritional superiority. Dogs possess evolutionary adaptations associated with starch utilisation [12], while cats can digest appropriately processed starch despite their distinct nutritional physiology [13]. Furthermore, Goloni et al. [14] demonstrated that dietary starch concentration may influence body weight regulation in neutered cats under specific feeding conditions. These findings emphasise the importance of evaluating complete formulations rather than relying on individual ingredients or generalised nutritional claims. Similarly, the legally established terminology used for ingredient declarations should not be interpreted as a direct indicator of product quality [5, 6].

Knowledge regarding individual nutritional needs was more variable. Most respondents (78.9%) recognised the importance of dietary adjustment after neutering, whereas only 54.4% considered weight-management diets useful for overweight animals. This difference is relevant because appropriate weight management requires both dietary adjustment and recognition of excess body condition. Blanchard et al. [15] reported disagreement between owner and veterinary body condition assessments in 32.6% of dogs and 36.7% of cats. Difficulties in recognising and managing excess body condition have also been highlighted in research examining owners' perceptions of canine nutrition and weight status [18]. Uncertainty was particularly evident regarding food allergies, with 40.8% and 60.2% of respondents selecting "do not know" for common allergens in dogs and cats, respectively. Moreover, 43.2% were uncertain about the regulatory status of the term "hypoallergenic", while only 2.0% of the 554 respondents providing an open-ended definition mentioned hydrolysed proteins. Although these responses do not establish clinical competence, they identify topics for clearer nutritional counselling. Mueller et al. [22] summarised commonly reported food allergen sources, while Jackson [23] emphasised the importance of appropriate elimination diets and diagnostic procedures in managing adverse food reactions.

Veterinary communication represents another important finding. Although 68.9% of respondents had discussed their animals' diet with a veterinarian, among the 342 explanations for the absence of such discussions, 19.6% considered them unnecessary, 17.8% expressed distrust, and 9.6% questioned veterinary expertise in nutrition. These concerns are particularly relevant considering that only 18.8% expressed trust in the pet food industry, whereas 40.2% reported distrust. Confidence in veterinary-associated brands was also divided, with 49.1% expressing trust and 41.4% reporting distrust. Previous research has highlighted the importance of professional nutritional education [16]. Bruckner and Handl [17], in a survey of 169 veterinary practitioners in Austria and Germany, found that only approximately half felt sufficiently qualified to provide nutritional advice. Furthermore, Schleicher et al. [10] reported that 43.6% of owners considered the veterinary healthcare team their primary source of nutritional information, whereas Godglück et al. [2] found that veterinary advice influenced food selection in only 14.1% of respondents. Although these studies assessed different aspects of veterinary communication, they demonstrate that obtaining information and incorporating professional recommendations into purchasing decisions are not necessarily equivalent. Kogan [24] also identified associations between satisfaction with preventive healthcare communication and perceptions of veterinary trustworthiness and empathy. These observations support the importance of transparent nutritional recommendations based on clearly explained dietary criteria rather than brand preference alone [8].

The findings should be interpreted in light of voluntary participation and reliance on self-reported responses. The analysis was limited to descriptive statistics, and associations between food-selection practices, nutritional beliefs, and veterinary guidance were not examined. Furthermore, the nutritional adequacy

of the diets consumed by respondents' animals was not independently evaluated. Therefore, the results describe owners' reported practices and perceptions rather than their effects on dietary adequacy or animal health.

5. Conclusions

The findings highlight important gaps between pet owners' interest in nutrition and their understanding of nutritional quality. Although most respondents recognised the importance of appropriate feeding, food selection was strongly influenced by ingredient-related information, while feeding instructions and more specific nutritional criteria received considerably less attention. Misconceptions regarding grain-free diets, protein content, and animal-derived ingredients were common, indicating that perceived food quality was frequently associated with individual product characteristics rather than a comprehensive nutritional assessment. Despite frequent discussions about nutrition with veterinarians, confidence in commercial pet food and veterinary-associated brands remained divided. These findings emphasise the need for clearer, evidence-based nutritional communication that helps owners interpret food labels, distinguish marketing claims from nutritional information, and evaluate dietary adequacy according to the individual animal's requirements. Strengthening owner education and transparent veterinary counselling may contribute to more informed feeding decisions and improved nutritional management of dogs and cats.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not sought for this study, as the research consisted exclusively of an anonymous, voluntary online questionnaire completed by adult dog and cat owners. The study involved no animal experimentation, clinical procedures, or interventions, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants before completing the questionnaire. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the absence of financial compensation or direct benefits, and the use of anonymised responses exclusively for scientific research. No personally identifiable information was collected.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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