Grains in pet foods

In focus

Grains provide valuable nutrients, but pet owners may believe that grains are “fillers” or that they may be a source of food allergies.

The Purina Institute provides the science to help you take the lead in conversations about nutrition.

Why is there grain in my pet’s food?

Grains are a rich source of nutrients for pets. Grains are the seeds of cereal grasses such as oats, barley and corn that help meet the body’s crucial need for glucose, an essential source of energy. Whole grains typically contain about 65-75% complex carbohydrates and less than 2% sugar.

They also provide protein, fiber, essential fatty acids, B vitamins and minerals.14

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What are the most common triggers of allergic reactions in pets?

Food allergies in pets are less common than environmental or flea allergies, and among food allergies, grains are not typically the source. However, all of these allergies may lead to similar skin and GI symptoms, making a diagnosis difficult.\(^7\)\(^8\)

If an adverse food reaction does occur, studies show the most common sources of food allergens are an individual’s specific immune reaction to the size or structure of a particular protein, and to previous exposure response to a protein – not to the carbohydrates in grains.

Grains are not among the most reported food allergens in either dogs or cats.\(^9\)

In dogs the top three food allergens are proteins from beef, dairy or chicken. In cats, the most commonly reported food allergens are from beef, chicken or fish.\(^3\)

Wild dogs and cats don’t eat grains so why should my pet?

Today’s dogs and cats can readily digest and use properly cooked grains. As modern dogs evolved from wild canids, genetic studies show that domestic canines acquired more genes that code for enzymes that can help digest grains.\(^1\)

Although domestic cats are carnivores—like their wild ancestors—and need certain nutrients found naturally in animal tissue, this does not mean that they can only eat meat or should not eat grains.

Even though cats use different metabolic pathways than other species use for digesting carbohydrates, research shows that cats can digest and use grains—with an efficiency greater than 90%.\(^4\)\(^6\)

Can my pet be allergic to gluten?

Glutens are the protein component of grains that may trigger allergies, but not all glutens are alike. The gluten from wheat, barley or rye contains “gliadins” that may trigger allergies, but not all glutens are alike. The gluten from gluten-sensitive enteropathy that is similar to celiac disease.\(^2\)

While specific lines of Irish Setters have a heritable form of gluten-sensitive enteropathy that is similar to celiac disease, this is not a common health condition in dogs or cats.\(^1\)\(^2\) Gliadin is not found in gluten from corn or rice, so these are unlikely to trigger an allergic response.

References

2. USDA Food Composition Databases, Standard reference database, National Agricultural Library v3.9.5.1_ accessed online 2019–01-29