



THE NUTRITION EDITIONS

What's better for your pet: chicken or chicken meal?

The answer may surprise you.

As a conscientious pet owner, you undoubtedly read the labels. So when you see one product list "chicken" and one list "chicken meal," which one do you assume is best?

Many pet owners might assume that chicken is a superior ingredient. After all, it's only logical to assume that feeding a pet a whole, non-rendered chicken would be good—like feeding a pet as you would a human.

But it's not quite like that.

Let's first consider the definitions of "chicken" and "chicken meal." The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) defines chicken as "a clean combination of flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from parts of whole carcasses of chickens thereof, exclusive of feathers, heads, feet and entrails." (Yummy.)

Chicken meal, according to AAFCO, is the "dry rendered product" from chicken.

So the chicken listed in pet food is essentially a ground-up roaster, mixing everything muscle, skin and bones together. The water content averages around 70%, along with 18% protein and 5% fat.

But what happens if you take this ground chicken and carefully dry it to a moisture level of 10%? The protein content rises to 65% and the fat level is 12%. This is chicken meal.

What's more, given standard pet food manufacturing methods, the high moisture content of chicken limits the amount that can be formulated into a complete finished food. On the other hand, chicken meal can be used in a finished food at levels much greater than chicken. As a result, the same amount of chicken meal provides roughly four to five times the nutrients as the same weight of chicken because of the differences in moisture. For example, 100 pounds of chicken meal provides 65 pounds of protein, while 100 pounds of "chicken" provides only 18 pounds of protein.

If you are label reader, you know that ingredients are listed by order of weight. So, a pet food listing "chicken" as its first ingredient may only have 20% of this ingredient in the final product, providing 3.6% protein. Chicken meal at 20% of the food, on the other hand, provides 13% protein.

If one product lists "chicken meal" as the first ingredient and another lists "chicken," it is almost certain the product with chicken meal makes a greater contribution to the total protein of the product than the product with chicken.

There is also a significant cost difference between these two ingredients. Due to the challenges in handling, chicken may cost 50% more than chicken meal.

Yet both chicken and chicken meal provide the same profile of amino acids and the protein building blocks. So, the nutrients from chicken meal from a good supplier will be just as good as the nutrients from chicken.

Pound for pound, however, chicken meal can provide more nutrients than chicken at a lower cost.

So if you picked "chicken meal," you may have plucked a winner!