

# Supplements, Vitamins and Alternative Medicine

## Science or Nutritional Voodoo?

A headline like that tends to jolt readers and quickly polarise those who are ardent believers versus those who think anything other than Western medicine is quackery. It was easy to dismiss vitamins and nutritional supplements in the human market as a marketing driven fad over the years, but the proof is in the long-term research into their effect on healthy as well as ill humans. And in our opening up this subject, there are volumes of studies, claims of cures and miracles as well as simple science. But since we're not scientists, we thought it best to look at the big picture rather than minutiae.



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Over the past five issues, we have had extensive editorial—often 5000-word pieces—dealing with what is in pet foods, what may be beneficial, what can be harmful as well as how to read labels for ingredients, explaining the difference between meat and byproducts, grains and other contents. These articles produced an incredible amount of feedback from our readers and only two corrections requested by pet food manufacturers. One was Purina where a few minor ingredients that are actually in their UK formula were misread from their Australian website. The other was 4Legs where we had attributed one of their foods as having a preservative when in fact it was four others instead of that one. We all make mistakes and are happy to correct them, but basically we hit the mark and it's caused a lot of owners to reconsider what they feed their pets.



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*Nutritional studies have shown that a regular diet of substandard canned or cooked foods can cause degenerative diseases and premature mortality.*

Pet foods are a lot more cut and dried, pardon the pun, to read the ingredients and understand what they are and what they do. In simplest terms it's how many ingredients and what are the main ones in order of weight. But with vitamins and supplements, it's a different story.

Aside from the protein, fat, carbohydrate, fibre and water components of pet food, you may not know what other nutrients are contained within them, which ones survived the heat and pressure processing or were added to make up for what was destroyed. And though you think you might be knowledgeable about vitamins, minerals and other nutrients because you read your own supplement formulas and think you can pronounce the scientific names, it doesn't translate to what your pet needs. Though there are 37 essential nutrients that dogs absolutely need in their food according to the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, there are a number of others that can address nutritional or health problems that have only recently been discovered as our pets are being researched more recently as we have over the centuries. And many of these are not contained in pet foods made to a price point.

On top of this, though human ingredients and levels are strictly regulated and monitored by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) by law, there are also standards for additives to animal products through the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA). They require that any pet food that is specifically formulated and used as a therapeutic pet food, has a label that makes a therapeutic claim or uses the words 'prescription' 'therapeutic' or 'medicated', must be registered and approved. You can see some of these rules on the APVMA website <http://www.apvma.gov.au> and search for Pet Food.

For this reason, some pet food manufacturers who have added glucosamine and chondroitin and made claims that it aids in joint disorders have recently run afoul of requirements that they register these compounds and prove their claims. This can be a six-month, \$30,000 requirement. But in terms of efficacy of ingredients, it's beneficial to choose a registered product over a non-registered one.

There are no shortages of disorders that affect pets. Aside from aging and more common major diseases like cancer and arthritis, there are digestive disorders and allergies caused by gluten or grain intolerances, skin and fur problems, bone and joint disorders, temperament and behavioural problems, immune deficiencies and other illnesses that can be traced to nutritional aspects among other factors. For this reason, it is beneficial that consumers choose a registered product over a non-registered one.

Just as if there are insufficient nutrients to supply the caloric and energy needs of pets, there are reasonable arguments that vitamin and mineral deficiencies can cause long term problems unless they are corrected. And that's where science meets commerce in many places where ingredients such as glucosamine and chondroitin for bone and joint disorders are suggested as either cures or relief; where essential fatty acids and omega oils are indicated in skin and fur problems or a combination of vitamins and trace mineral would seem to be what's needed to counter over processed and deficient food formulas whether kibbled, canned or prepared fresh/frozen meat products.

One thing is sure, nutritional studies have shown that a regular diet of substandard canned or cooked foods can cause degenerative diseases and premature mortality. And this is why pet food companies have had a long tradition of testing their products on animal to determine proper nutrient composition or quantity ratios depending on size, activity and other factors. But over the past few years, there have been a number of new products that have entered the market addressing issues of holistic health regimens, micronutrients or simple common sense nutrition.

Over the years, strange animal habits have been related to nutritional deficiencies. Dogs and cats eating faeces has been attributed to their need to have essential bacteria in their guts or simply because with food going through them so quickly, it's simply tasty the second time around! We know of bird flocks that nibble clay deposits for minerals as do other animals eating dirt, clay or salt licks. Eating grass or leaves is thought to make animals throw up by self inducing vomiting if they are ill and even chewing on non food items from cloth to wood, plants and even cement is thought to be an attempt to make up for a lack of nutrients.

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We know eating some non-food items can be toxic, obstructive or fatal and eating faeces is simply disgusting. But these are symptoms of problems—either nutritional or behavioural—for which the cure can be an alteration of diet and specific additions to the diet.

The first thing not to do is try to feed pets human vitamins. While they are formulated for our perceived body needs, gender indications, absorption rates and weights, they do not translate to far smaller pets who have totally different needs. For example, Vitamins A, D and E can be toxic in large doses and trying to divide tablets, capsule or powders is just not going to work. Similarly, feeding human-style glucosamine and chondroitin formulas may be neither palatable nor fully digestible. For example, one simple reason is that small animals often have shorter digestive systems than humans and differing digestive chemicals than we do and neither our dosages nor formulations can work. If anything, they can cause harm.

So it's not surprising that pet vitamin and mineral compounds are not only being introduced by commercial companies and pharmaceutical corporations through veterinarians, there is a new market of over-the-counter nutraceuticals or nutritional supplements for pets that are being sold through pet shops and even chemists. Just as we humans take vitamins, minerals and supplements as 'insurance' for our diets, we also take these nutrients to ward off illness or treat conditions that they are indicated for helping alleviate. Or so the marketing spin sometimes preaches.

**CLINICAL STUDIES ESTIMATE THAT:**  
20% of dogs that are 1 year old have arthritis  
40% of dogs that are 5 years old have arthritis  
80% of dogs that are 8 years old have arthritis  
Over 90% of dogs have arthritis at the end of their life

If you own a German Shepherd, Labrador Retriever, Golden Retriever or Rottweiler these figures could be even higher.

**Symptoms for Arthritis are:**

- Limping or trouble walking
- Licking affected joints
- Reluctance to play, go for walks, get in the car, climb stairs
- Behavioural changes such as aggression or withdrawal
- Stiffness when getting up
- Resistance to touch

Not all dogs will show obvious symptoms, so it is important to be aware of how prevalent arthritis can be, particularly in certain breeds. It is the **Number 1** cause of chronic pain in dogs and sadly goes untreated in too many cases.

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References: 1. Smith GK *et al*, JAVMA 2001;219(12):1719-1724.  
2. Runge JJ *et al*, Veterinary Surgery 2008;37:102-103. 3. Smith GK *et al*, JAVMA 2006;229(5):690-693.



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From personal experience, I've made many attempts to supplement my pets' diets. For the dogs over the years, I've used combinations of garlic and brewers yeast tablets brought back from the US because they were not available here, as well as pet vitamins. A couple of reasons for this, garlic can assist the immune system, brewers yeast has high B vitamin content and can assist in flea defence, some say by making the dog distasteful. However, that was speculative and those nutrients were not harmful. Some have pointed out to us that brewers yeast can cause an allergic reaction in some animals. We were more worried it would make our dogs crave beer!

I've fed the dogs spirulina (a sea plant) tablets as well as using the powder for the parrots in their feed. We have a vitamin compound from the US (unavailable here) for the birds which we tend to use mostly around moulting times when they are stressed, and also use flaxseed oil plus a specific US-sourced nutrient mix I won't name here so as not to be seen to be promoting. Whether as a result of feeding these additives or simply because of a great diet and good genes, our pets have been super healthy and this can be seen in the lustre of their fur and feathers as well as their bouncy nature.

But we're not food scientists so we can't really prove that what we are doing has a cause and effect nor have we made the correct assumptions on nutritional flows. For example, we have been feeding the dogs canned sardines in oil knowing that the bones are a great source of calcium, glucosamine and chondroitin for bone and ligament health. But we also thought the oil was high in omega-3 when in fact, it's mostly destroyed through heat processing. Still, the dogs love it. So we started using fish oil capsules but really didn't know the right dosage levels, so were careful with this and did some research on using them.

What we didn't know until we studied up on was the young pups and kitties need extra support for their immune systems while older animals need added nutrients because their ability to absorb some of them decreases with age or they need to eat one nutrient alongside the other to aid absorption. Another factor we had to face was, just like when we take antibiotics and need to rebalance our gut flora with a probiotic formula ranging from yoghurt to mega-microbe concoctions, animals also need to maintain and reinforce gastric microflora, hence the new formulations to address this.

*Young pups and kitties need extra support for their immune systems while older animals need added nutrients because their ability to absorb some of them decreases with age.*

There are a number of studies on these issues and there are also a number of companies that have introduced products that address them. Their websites are full of information to help you go through the food science and nutritional indications you need to make a decision on what's right for your pet. But this should be done in consultation with your veterinarian or pet health adviser as well.

For example, the condition of arthritis that affects the bones, joints and cartilage of dogs is a common ailment that can be due to aging as well as injury, surgery or overwork of joints. The inflammation that occurs causes the body to release chemicals which can break down cartilage and leave bones exposed to friction and the body to pain. Recognising symptoms such as limping, stiffness when getting up, tenderness in joints, resisting play or activity as well as withdrawal can be crucial to having the pet diagnosed properly and commencing the right treatment if it is arthritis.

We had this condition with two of our dogs and not only used nutritional therapy to manage the condition but also animal acupuncture which, combined, appeared to produce remarkable results. It started with a vet assessment and then we had choices for regimens to rebuild the damaged cartilage and also relieve pain or discomfort. But what worked for us may not for you and it all depends on the pet's diet, condition, age, exercise parameters and other factors for which you need professional advice.

For those of you who make food for your pets rather than using solely commercial pet food—estimated at about 10% of pet owners—you not only need to make sure you have immaculate hygiene in your preparation areas and cooking, but also storage and serving. But you also need to know how to make sure your foods are balanced and this takes research. And a good vitamin and mineral supplement as well as other added nutrients assure your pet gets what it needs.

You will notice that we have not named brands, recommended one product over another nor even referred to our advertisers—present in this edition and past in previous issues. Part of the reason is that we don't do advertorial and the other is that we're not in a position to say with certainty that one is better than another since it depends entirely on the animal, the situation and whether a product or products would specifically work.

Solutions to pet health issues are often multi-disciplinary and require changes to diet, environment, exercise and feeding habits as well as conventional medicine and/or alternative practices. Our best advice is to confer with your vet in advance before making any changes, do your research online or through experts without falling foul of 'miracle cures', untested remedies or mega-nutrient regimens. We'll probably tackle more on this topic in the next issue as we get feedback from both professionals and readers.

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