Sacha Packer — Apr 16, 2018 · 6 min read

What's better? Chicken or Chicken Meal?

To start with, we have to define the question a little more: "What delivers higher quality meat protein"?

What savvy consumers often think when they hear the Chicken vs Chicken Meal question, is that Chicken (Raw) has at least 70% water weight and therefore after processing, it will likely drop in position on the ingredient label where ingredients appear based on their weight order. The general rule is that the top 5 ingredients represent around 80% of what's in the bag. Because of this factor, consumers often think 'Meal' which is a cooked and ground up product will be instantly better because it only contains around 5% moisture so will retain its position in the ingredient label...but this is where it gets tricky because the weight of a product does not define its quality.

Did you know that kibble companies are not allowed to refer to the quality *(digestability, essential nutrients that are in the ingredients and actually how available they are to the dog)* of the ingredients in the bag? This makes it incredibly difficult/impossible for consumers to know exactly what they're putting in the mouths of their dogs.

So, let's first start with defining what Chicken in its different states actually is:

Chicken

As described by AAFCO, Chicken is *"the combination of flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone derived from parts or whole carcasses of chicken exclusive (not including) of feathers, heads, feet, and intestines".*

Chicken (raw) has not been cooked and contains 50-70% moisture which is reduced by around two-thirds during the cooking process.

Typically, no more than 35% raw chicken is used in kibble formula's as it can be problematic for the manufacturing machinary so if you see a kibble that only lists 'Chicken' then you could make an assumption that it's less than 35%.

What we don't know is what 'Chicken' actually is in your bag of kibble, it could be chicken fillets or it could be chicken carcass or anything inbetween - this will differ company to company. Do not rely on the image on the front of bag, that is simply marketing hype to draw you in.

What we know is that it is not the 'entire chicken' like we see in kibbles such as Orijen (not available in Australia at this time) - they use the entire animal which is all kinds of awesome in terms of naturally deriving amino acids, vitamins and minerals instead of having to add a whole bunch of synthetic ones at the end and although it's still cooked, it's getting closer to biologically appropriate.

Chicken Meal

AAFCO defines the term 'meal' as: *"dry, rendered product from a combination of clean flesh and skin with or without accompanying bone, derived from the parts of whole carcass of [chicken], exclusive (does not include) feathers, heads, feet & entrails".*

Chicken meal could be a product made only from high-quality, deboned chicken breasts, much like the kind you would find in a grocery store; or it could be made from the entire carcasses of spent egg farm hens at the end of their productive cycle. These hens put all their energy into producing eggs and do not have a lot of muscle on their skeletal frames, so you have a fairly high ratio of skin and bone vs. quality muscle meat. One defining characteristic of a high quality meat meal is a low ash content, which means the proportion of bone to meat is low. (3)

The truth seems to be though that Chicken Meal is often is made from chicken frames which is part of the chicken that remains after the human processing plants take what they need. (2) However, in saying this.

Meals can be either good or poor quality and this depends on how they are processed and handled. If the protein is damaged then it's not a good source of amino acid for dogs. Unfortunately as outlined above, there is no way for consumers to know if the meal in their dog food is good or poor quality.

It's important to note that 'meal' is cooked twice to make kibble, once to be rendered into a meal and then the 2nd time when the kibble itself is made.

Chicken By-Product Meal

AAFCO outlines that Chicken by-product meal may contain varying amounts of clean flesh and skin - (varying meaning probably not alot). PLUS chicken heads, chicken feet and chicken guts.

There have been some interesting studies into by-product meals as protein sources for dogs - the general finding is the meals 'slightly' contain more amino acids and are 'slightly' more digestable than by-product meals.

In a 1998 study, they found that the viscera which is the chicken's internal organs and intestinal contents were similar in protein quality to the chicken flesh components included in high quality chicken meals.

They also found that chicken heads were slightly lower in quality and chicken feet were much lower in quality when compared to chicken meat. In short, a by-product meals quality is influenced by these variables - does it contain chicken feet and if so, how much.

Chicken Meal vs Chicken By-product Meal

Meals are generally of moderately higher quality than by-product meals BUT if the by-product meal doesn't contain chicken feet then you're getting pretty close.

BUT, you as the consumer has no way to know this information.

In my opinion, it comes down to not pretending to be something you're not, for instance, if you're a kibble company who charges $120 for a bag of kibble whose main ingredient is by-product meal that cost you significantly less than Chicken Meal then that's not fair to the consumer. If you're a kibble company who charges $40 for a bag of kibble with chicken by-product meal as the main ingredient, then that seems much more fair. As you cannot confirm quality, I would personally err on the side of caution and go with the chicken meal and hope that the meal has been processed and handled in a way not to damage the protein.

Digestability

And this is what it comes down, but it's not something your kibble company are going to put on their bags or their website. You could ask, but you're likely to be ignored or fobbed off.

AAFCO don't have any rules or regulations about how digestable dog food is - that's kind of shocking.

Digestibility is usually preformed by feeding trials. Dog food is fed into a number of dogs and their stools are analysed to see what nutrients come out. The difference between input and output is the availability of nutrients or digestibility. (4)

A low digestible dog food means a dog will have to consume a higher volume of food - we see this with the cheap kibbles. Digestibility also has a large affect on faecal volume and form and defecation frequency and dog owners notice this when they switch between budget and higher quality kibbles or transition to fresh food diets.

Tips on picking your kibble:

- Look for a 'named' meat protein as the first ingredient i.e. Chicken vs Meat

VS

- If your kibble is 'Kangaroo' then you don't want to see any other non-fish ingredients in there i.e. Chicken meal because this is a cheap way of bulking up the meat proteins and it's not what you thought you were buying.

- Avoid fat sources that aren't named i.e. Animal fat vs Chicken fat as named animal fats are of higher quality.

- If a named meat is not followed by a named meat 'meal' in the top 3 ingredients, then it is most likely that the majority of the kibble is from non-meat sources. Your 2nd ingredient can generally be assumed as the most predominant in this case.

- If it's is not in meal form then it may drop further down the ingredient list after processing when the water content has been removed, you'll want to see a named meal meal following it or in the top 3 ingredients.

So....

Unfortunately, if you're feeding kibble, you just don't know what is in it unless the company is transparent and shares this information with you and there's only a few of those. So, which is it? Chicken or Chicken Meal? There's more protein in Chicken Meal but is it higher quality protein? I'd go with the raw chicken given it's only cooked once and its less likely to just be chicken carcass BUT we don't know 100% for sure if that's the case with any given kibble line.

Now, just to give you something else to think about - the inclusion on a meal does not mean there is a guaranteed amount of meal in the kibble - this differs greatly between kibbles, let me give you some examples...

We recently asked kibble companies "from their Protein %, how much was derived from meat i.e. meat meals not including fats, gravies etc."

And here's some of those answers so you can see the difference:

Stay Loyal - Salmon & Turkey Meals

82%

XP3020 - Chicken Meal

30%

Both these kibbles have quality ingredients, one simply has more meat than the other.

Not all companies provide this information when asked such as: Canidae, Ivory Coat, Eagle Pack, Nutro, Billy + Margot - please note, we only asked kibble companies who had formula's that looked quality so we did not ask the likes of Royal Canine, Advance, Hills Science Diet, Eukanuba, Purina, Supercoat etc.

Remember, if Chicken not a Chicken Meal is the first ingredient, you want to see it followed up by a meal otherwise there's not alot of meat in that kibble.

Corrections?

If you have a correction to any of the information contained within, please let us know.

References

(1) http://www.petsumerreport.com

(2) Dog Food Logic, Linda P. Case, M.S.

(3) http://www.dogfoodproject.com/index.php?page=meat-meal

(4) https://www.healthydogtreats.com.au/dog-nutrition/118-dog-food-digestibly

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