



Dr Anton C Beynen is affiliated with Vobra Special Petfoods. In the period of 1993-2007, he was professor of veterinary nutrition at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University, The Netherlands.



# Holistic Pet Foods

*Holistic is a term often seen on a bag of pet food, but the meaning is hard to grasp by merely reading the label. The word holistic relates to holism, which is a theory viewing the world as a single system with all parts of living and non-living nature as equal, interactive and interdependent. Holistic medicine attempts to treat the whole patient rather than its parts with perceptible disease only. There are no regulations or legal definitions for the word holistic put in pet food labels. Any manufacturer is free to use the term holistic in marketing its products. Based on the medical meaning, it could be suggested that all commercial, complete and balanced pet foods, which by extended, legal definition support the entire animal, are holistic. Within this context, holistic as package claim would not make a difference.*

*Commercial dog and cat foods labelled holistic, in fact, are natural foods carrying the absence of artificial substances as major claim. Different holistic foods may propagate different, additional marketing claims. Holistic veterinarians generally regard the wolf's diet as ideal for domestic dogs and advise compatible home-made rations or specific commercial, meat-based frozen foods.*

*Holistic and non-holistic, industrially produced pet foods have no divergent, systematic impact on dog and cat health. Owners who wish to learn the premises underlying the link between holistic and a certain pet food brand should contact the manufacturer. It is every way reasonable to ask for an explanation of the word holistic on the package. Owners may use the feedback to decide which pet food is acceptable and which falls short of their concept.*

Holistic dog and cat foods in the pet market can be considered equal to natural foods (Creature Companion, 2014; September, pages 56-57), but many holistic foods go beyond just natural. They then fit into one of the recognisable categories of the natural segment. Foods labelled holistic may be positioned as no corn, no wheat, no gluten, grain-free, with specific grains, meat-first, protein-rich or low in carbohydrates.

It is unclear what holistic actually means as descriptor of commercial pet food, but many manufacturers unmistakably look at it as marketing tool. Holistic is not only used as package tag, but also incorporated into brand names. The massive supply of holistic foods and their obscure character are pointing at many holistic-neutral or credulous buyers.

**Legislation and Certification**  
As mentioned, holistic has no legal definition. Likewise, it has not been defined by pet food industry associations. In EU countries, legislation requires that marketing claims for pet foods are understandable by purchasers. Moreover, manufacturers must be able to substantiate their claims. Thus, when requested by pet owners, manufacturers are expected to provide a clear description of their shaping of holistic.

Until 2013, the British Association of Holistic Nutrition and Medicine (BAHNM) operated a national certification scheme for commercial products, including pet foods. There are at least five brands of BAHNM-certified, complete foods for dogs. These products are in the form of dry kibbles or wet foods sterilised by high-temperature

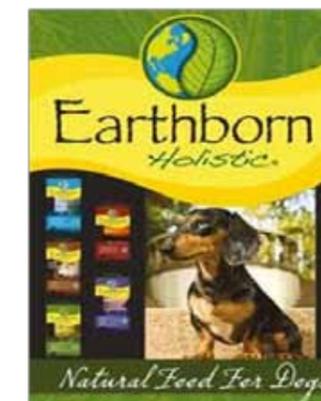


extrusion and cooking, respectively. According to the ingredient lists, the foods contain one or more cultivated grains (rice, oats, barley, corn). For many pet owners, the earlier granted BAHNM certification (see certificate seal) is up for debate.

**Holistic Philosophy and Nutrition**  
The holistic philosophy of human and animal nutrition is based on equity within and between the living and natural worlds, including humankind, animals, plants, land and seascapes. It is accepted that man and animals must live at the expense of other's lives, but they owe their existence to others, which has to be acknowledged in order to constitute the equity of being. Therefore, holistic principles dictate that plants and animals should live well before harvested or killed to serve as food for others. This implies that animal welfare and sustainable production methods are key issues.

**Feeding Pets**  
Putting holistic philosophy into feeding pets is somewhat flexible, but with common basis. Holistic philosophy presumes that animals possess a natural instinct to select feedstuffs that form a healthy diet. For the domestic dog, natural nutrition of the wolf is accepted as optimal. In practice, holistic dog food generally consists of raw, bony pieces of flesh and organ meats, vegetables and compatible supplements. Starch-rich foodstuffs such as grains and potatoes are held as unnatural and thus, inappropriate.

Whole instead of fractionated ingredients are favoured. The natural



food matrix is believed to produce greater health benefits than the sum of corresponding actions of the individual food components. Another idea behind whole ingredients is that unidentified components might be lost during fractionation. Our knowledge of food materials may be incomplete and some health effects may result from unidentified constituents. In general, ingredient and product processing is rejected because it may destruct beneficial components.

The ideal holistic dog ration is best approached by home making. Holistic principles deny industrially prepared, extruded dry foods because they have been subjected to high temperature, contain synthetic additives, including artificial vitamins, and usually are rich in grains. Similarly, pasteurised canned foods are turned down. Complete, frozen raw foods, which are based on fresh meats and getting near to the wolf's diet, are acceptable, provided that the criteria of animal welfare and sustainability are met.

**Qualification**  
There is no scientific evidence that applying holistic philosophy per se leads to superior dog and cat diets. Holistic principles should be used in concert with the fundamentals of nutrition science (Creature Companion, 2014; March, pages 66-67).

*Dr Beynen will be writing this exclusive column on dog and cat nutrition and nutrition-related items every month.*