

# Nutrition FAQ

**Senior pet appointments are often packed with questions, concerns, and important information—but appropriate nutrition is critical for senior pets.** It's worth taking a little time to talk to clients about feeding their geriatric companions for longevity, joint health, and even disease management.

Consistency is important. If pet owners hear different messages from different team members, they'll be confused and possibly lose trust in the team's recommendations. This is especially important when it comes to nutrition, which can be an emotionally charged subject for both clients and veterinary professionals.

Vicky Ograin, MBA, RVT, VTS (Nutrition), has spent a lot of her career talking about nutrition, and senior pet appointments are some of her favorites—so she was a natural choice to answer some FAQ about what really matters when it comes to these essential conversations.

## **Q: Nutrition seems like a really great place to empower technicians.**

**A:** It's so appropriate for technicians to have these conversations. When I was working in clinics and I knew that my recommendations helped people, it fueled my heart and kept my passion for this profession. I've been in it a very, very long time, and I have not lost that passion. Especially with senior pets, it's an amazing journey to go on with them and see them as they mature, and then make sure they've got the best care and nutrition as they navigate their senior years. Hopefully there is a person in the practice who has that passion and wants to have those conversations and support the veterinarian and their schedule.

## **Q: Why does it seem so difficult to talk to pet owners about nutrition in a way they trust and understand?**

**A:** First off, the pet parents who are coming in desperately love their pets. Particularly with senior pets, they've spent so many years with them, they just want to do what's best for them. Unfortunately, there are mostly well-meaning people on the internet who are basically other pet parents trying to give

advice, and that's what we're up against. So what I'll typically do is I'll ask them what they're feeding and then I ask them why, without any judgment, which can be hard sometimes! But I know they're desperately just trying to do what's right for their pet. When you know that, I think it helps. And then when I understood why they were feeding it, it really helped because sometimes it was that the neighbor recommended it, or it's something they've been feeding their entire lives. You have to get on their level and explain the benefits of the food. This takes a bit of time, but really not that much, and it's valuable to them.

## **Q: Do senior pets need a senior diet?**

**A:** It depends. I look at diets made by companies that truly research senior pets and understand the nuances of senior nutrition, particularly when we look at protein and minerals, knowing those need to be more controlled for seniors. I think it's important to put them on a senior food, particularly when they get into that geriatric phase.

## **Q: What about senior pets who are happy on their current diet but develop a condition we might normally recommend a therapeutic diet for? If owners are nervous about switching, how can we have that conversation?**

**A:** I understand that—it's not just the pet, you're also dealing with the pet parent. And they're maybe worried because the cat is a picky eater, the dog likes a particular food, maybe they have other dogs or cats in the house, it's going to be inconvenient... there are lots of things to consider. The one thing I always think about is, what if the kidneys are in that gray area and they are eating an adult or "all life stages" food that has high mineral content? How long are those kidneys going to keep functioning?



Nutrition is such an appropriate place for technicians to have conversations with pet parents.

—VICKY OGRAIN, MBA,  
RVT, VTS (NUTRITION)



**Q: A lot of pet owners seem to think their senior pet needs more protein. Is this true?**

**A:** The reality is that the body only needs so much protein – once it has used up the amount of protein it needs, the rest of it just gets expelled. So you’re putting a workload on the liver and kidneys – why are we making those kidneys work harder? So really what you want for a senior dog or cat is a more high-quality bioavailable protein, meaning all the amino acids they need are in a smaller amount. When there’s extra, you just have brown grass. For senior dogs, we look at about 23% on a dry matter basis, and for cats, up to about 45%. Unfortunately, if you look at the bag, the guaranteed analysis is on what’s called an “as fed” basis, meaning the water is included. So for example, if you have a canned food that has 10% protein as fed, that’s with the water added—when you take the water out, it becomes more like 50%.

**Q: Can you give us a general guideline for how much phosphorus should be in a senior food?**

**A:** According to *Small Animal Clinical Nutrition, 5th edition*, 0.7%, so a very small amount, is what we want for senior dogs and cats. When you get into kidney disease, you’re looking at more like 0.5%. 0.8% is what’s recommended for adults. And I’ve seen a cat food that was over 2% phosphorus, because there’s no maximum for cats. And foods don’t have to share the mineral content. And the protein on the label was very low, because it’s a canned food, so it worries me that a pet parent is going to look at that and think that food is OK to feed, when in actuality the phosphorus is way too high for a senior cat, particularly with diagnosed kidney disease.

**Q: How can pet owners be empowered to make their own choices and also make sure they understand our recommendations? How can they find out how much of a nutrient is actually in a food?**

**A:** I would absolutely recommend calling the company. The WSAVA Global Nutrition Committee created a pet owner guideline for selecting a pet food, including eight questions to ask about the brand and the food label, including who formulates the food, whether they employ a PhD or Board Certified Veterinary Nutritionist, whether they are doing feeding trials. When I had pet parents call the





food companies, they came back even if they got answers. We talked about what they learned, and the next thing out of their mouth was often, “What do you recommend then?” And they went home with it.

**Q: Can diets really help pets with cancer or cognitive dysfunction?**

**A:** Yes, therapeutic foods are really there to support them as they go through treatment. So we still want to make sure we’re doing multimodal treatment. There are so many diets out there that can help with different conditions. I completely believe in the benefits of therapeutic nutrition.

**Q: What about those pets with multiple conditions, like a senior Labrador who’s overweight and has arthritis and skin disease and now cancer – how do you discuss diet with owners when there are so many things to keep track of?**

**A:** Those are really challenging. Those are ones where you really become part of the treatment plan, in a way, in that you’re their support. The veterinarian is going to have to decide what is most crucial to treat. All the pet food companies that have therapeutic nutrition have call centers with nutritionists who can help you decide. Really this is where the team can rally around the owner and help them. I truly believe one of the most important things you can do, with all owners but particularly with those owners, is follow up. Be their cheerleader.

**Q: How can a vet team member who is passionate about nutrition immediately start to improve how their practice addresses nutrition in senior pets?**

**A:** Have a conversation with everybody. Let them know this is a passion of yours, and you think this will bring value to the clinic and the patients. You need buy-in; the pet parent needs to hear it from everybody. So everybody needs to be on the same page. The more times a client hears, “Oh, this is a great food,” they’re more inclined to accept it. If a veterinarian makes a recommendation, and the CSR says, “Oh, this is very expensive, “it’s going to make it more difficult. Then get up your confidence by starting some recommendations maybe with puppies and kittens and working up to senior pets and therapeutic foods.

