

AAFCO Feeding Trials

One of the ways for a pet food manufacturer to establish that its diet is "complete and balanced" or "for all life stages" is by conducting a feeding trial. The trial must follow guidelines established by AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials). The protocol of an AAFCO feeding trial is summarized below. This information is available in the annual "Official Publication" published by AAFCO, and may be ordered by visiting www.aafco.org.

Only 8 animals (either dogs or cats) need to participate in the feeding trial. There is no restriction regarding breed or sex. Only 6 of these 8 need to complete the trial, which lasts for just 26 weeks. During the trial, the only food available to the test animals is the food being tested. Water is available ad libitum.

Before the trial starts, and after it ends, the participating animals must pass a physical examination by a veterinarian. The veterinarians evaluate general health, body and hair coat condition. At the end (but not at the beginning) of the trial, 4 blood values are measured and recorded: hemoglobin, packed cell volume, serum alkaline phosphatase, and serum albumin.

The diet being tested fails if any animal shows clinical or pathological signs of nutritional deficiency or excess. No dog or cat is allowed to lose more than 15% of its starting body weight. Specific minimum values for the blood tests are given, and applied to the average result of all participating animals that finished the trial.

In summary, the rules for the feeding trial appear very loose. The food being tested must merely keep 6 out of 8 seemingly healthy dogs/cats alive for 6 months, without them losing more than 15% of their initial body weight, and without the average of 4 certain blood values falling below minimum levels. Most nutritional deficiencies or excesses will not be apparent within a brief 6 month period, as they tend to take much longer to develop. It certainly seems that the AAFCO Feeding Trial leaves a lot to be desired, as far as confirming the safety and reliability of pet foods!

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