

A SHOPPING AND KITCHEN REFERENCE

The Dog-Food Label Decoder

A practical guide to hidden ingredients, product traps, and the package details worth checking before you share.

HIDDEN INGREDIENTS TO WATCH FOR

Read past the front of the package.

Use this guide to scan labels quickly, compare similar products, and keep useful package details when something goes wrong.

IMPORTANT

Educational information only. This guide does not replace veterinary advice, poison-control guidance, diagnosis, or treatment.

Read the package, not the promise

Front-label claims such as natural, healthy, low sugar, keto, protein, or plant-based do not answer whether a product is appropriate for a dog.

1

Name the product

Record the brand, exact variety, package size, and serving form.

2

Read every ingredient

Do not stop after the first five ingredients. Flavorings, sweeteners, concentrates, and powders may appear later.

3

Scan for high-risk words

Check for xylitol or birch sugar, grapes or raisins, chocolate or cocoa, caffeine, alcohol, onion, garlic, and macadamia nuts.

4

Check the preparation

Fried, smoked, heavily salted, sugar-free, filled, coated, or seasoned foods need more scrutiny than a plain ingredient.

5

Notice the serving size

A human serving is not a dog portion. Rich foods and concentrated ingredients can add up quickly.

6

Keep the package

If an exposure occurs, save the package or take clear photos of the ingredients, lot information, and amount remaining.

THE RECHECK RULE

Recipes and suppliers change. Recheck the ingredient list after a package redesign, a new flavor, a formula update, or a long gap between purchases.

Hidden ingredients to watch for

This is a screening list, not a complete toxicology reference. If a concerning exposure may have occurred, contact a veterinary professional promptly.

LABEL WORDS	COMMON PLACES	WHY TO PAUSE
Xylitol, birch sugar, wood sugar, birch bark extract	Sugar-free gum, candy, baked goods, nut butter, toothpaste, supplements	Can cause rapid low blood sugar and liver injury in dogs
Raisins, grapes, currants, grape concentrate	Trail mix, breads, cereal, granola, sauces, baked goods	Associated with acute kidney injury in some dogs
Cocoa, cacao, chocolate, coffee, caffeine	Candy, brownies, drink mixes, protein foods, desserts	Can affect the heart and nervous system
Onion, garlic, leek, chive, allium powders	Broth, soup, gravy, seasoning blends, chips, prepared meat	Concentrated forms can damage red blood cells
Alcohol, ethanol, liqueur, raw yeast dough	Desserts, extracts, drinks, unbaked dough	Can depress the nervous system; dough can expand and produce alcohol
Macadamia nuts	Cookies, trail mix, nut blends, candy	Can cause weakness, vomiting, tremors, and fever
High sodium or concentrated salt	Cured meat, chips, broth, seasoning, salt dough	May cause serious illness at high exposures

LOOK AT THE WHOLE PRODUCT

One product may combine several hazards. Chocolate baked goods, trail mix, protein snacks, and sugar-free desserts deserve a complete ingredient review.

The package can change the answer

The base ingredient may be reasonable while the finished product contains seasonings, sweeteners, coatings, fats, or other ingredients that change the answer.

Peanut butter

Plain, unsalted nut butter is different from a sugar-free or specialty spread. Confirm that xylitol is not listed.

Yogurt

Plain yogurt is different from a flavored dessert yogurt containing chocolate, fruit concentrates, sweeteners, or high fat.

Cooked chicken

Plain cooked chicken is different from rotisserie or prepared chicken with skin, salt, onion, garlic, sauces, or bones.

Oatmeal

Plain cooked oats are different from granola, bars, or flavored packets containing raisins, chocolate, nuts, or sweeteners.

Pumpkin

Plain 100% pumpkin is different from pie filling containing sugar, spices, and other ingredients.

Bread

A small piece of plain baked bread is different from raw dough or bread containing raisins, chocolate, onion, garlic, or macadamias.

KEEP THE EVIDENCE

Save the package, ingredient panel, nutrition panel, lot number, expiration date, and photos. Note the package size and estimate what is missing before calling for help.

The package-check checklist

Use the left column before buying and the right column before sharing. Recheck every new flavor and formula.

Before it goes in the cart

- ☐ Read the complete ingredient list
- ☐ Check sugar-free and low-sugar products carefully
- ☐ Look for concentrated powders and flavorings
- ☐ Review serving size, calories, fat, and sodium
- ☐ Choose the simplest version when appropriate
- ☐ Plan secure storage before bringing it home

Before your dog gets a taste

- ☐ Confirm every ingredient again
- ☐ Remove wrappers, pits, bones, skewers, and strings
- ☐ Serve plain when the food is appropriate
- ☐ Keep the first portion very small
- ☐ Introduce only one new food at a time
- ☐ Save the package until you know the food was tolerated

POSSIBLE EXPOSURE?

Keep the package and call your veterinarian, emergency clinic, or animal poison control. Do not wait for symptoms after a known high-risk exposure.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

FDA: Paws Off! Xylitol Is Toxic to Dogs | ASPCA: People Foods to Avoid Feeding Your Pets | Merck Veterinary Manual: Food Hazards | Pet Poison Helpline: Poison Pantry

SEARCH THE FULL FOOD SAFETY LIBRARY

Ingredient lists answer only part of the question. Preparation, portion, dog size, health history, and the exact product all matter.

canmydogeatthat.com/food-database/