

## **Veterinarians and the pet food industry**

*Stepfanie George*

Many pet parents have questions regarding veterinarians' nutrition education, or their role in the pet food industry. There are also a lot of myths surrounding veterinarians' relationships with large pet food companies. Let's clear the air!



### **... but first, definitions.**

“Big Pet Food” is a nickname for the [higher grossing](#) pet food companies in the industry. “The Big Three” is a nickname for the three manufacturers that have been making maintenance and therapeutic diets for dogs and cats for decades, and are the ones that [veterinarians typically recommend](#): Nestlé Purina, Hill’s, and Royal Canin.

### **Does “Big Pet Food” pay for vet students’ education?**

No.

Four years of veterinary school [tuition](#) in the United States costs between one hundred fifty and four hundred thousand dollars. Veterinary students receive much of what they need from [federal student loans](#) for tuition and fees, books, housing, transportation, and living expenses. These loans are paid back to the federal government when the students graduate.

Veterinary students may also receive scholarships to help fund their education from private or professional organizations, school endowments, or other sources. Scholarships are a gift to the student that do not have to be paid back.

Very few pet food companies offer scholarships to veterinary students, but less than half of the veterinary schools in the US have scholarship funds set up by pet food companies. These are typically merit-based scholarships, and they award between \$1,000-2,000 to a single veterinary student per school (if offered), per year. This is an extremely small sum when compared to the cost of tuition – less than 1%!

### **Why does “Big Pet Food” donate money to vet schools?**

[Donations](#) from many sources are used to help schools become more advanced so they can benefit students and patients in as many ways as possible.

Only a few pet food companies are in the position to make donations to veterinary schools. These companies are the ones that tend to be more science and research-based, so veterinary schools welcome their donations. These donations are used to support animal health through investigating new treatments for diseases or looking at new ways to improve health. They can also be used to build new patient kitchens or treatment wards in university teaching hospitals. [Donations from pet food companies](#) greatly benefit the receiving schools as well as the greater veterinary community that school serves, especially as many states have eliminated or reduced funding for their nutrition programs.

It is important to recognize that veterinarians and students may develop [implicit biases](#) when it comes to particular companies due to their support of veterinary training programs. However, many veterinary universities are [taking steps](#) to prevent or at least dramatically minimize these biases, and encourage students to consider the science and use objective measures when [evaluating pet food companies](#).

#### **Are vet students taught to recommend only “The Big Three”?**

No.

Veterinary students are taught to use an evidence-based approach to patient care. This involves conducting thorough examinations of their patients, collecting as much history and information on their patient as possible, keeping up with current research, , and talking to pet owners about their concerns and objectives before making any recommendations. Particular pet food companies may be recommended by veterinarians more than others because those companies employ experts, have extensive quality control for ingredients and manufacturing, and conduct and publish research on optimal nutrition approaches for maintaining health and treating disease.

#### **How much nutrition schooling do vet students receive?**

More than in the past! All veterinary schools in the United States offer at least one nutrition course during the four years of training. Some schools also have elective in-depth nutrition classes, some have nutrition clinical rotations in the teaching hospital, and others teach nutrition in a block with other subjects.

The American College of Veterinary Nutrition has established a [list of competencies](#) that all new veterinarians should possess at the time of graduation. There are 53 nutrition-related skills that small animal veterinarians are expected to have when they enter practice.

Even so, much of what veterinary students and veterinarians learn takes place in the clinic, on the

job, or through [continuing education](#) (CE) after graduation. CE is how veterinarians stay up-to-date with topics and research in the ever-evolving field of veterinary medicine. CE is offered online, at veterinary conferences, and at universities. It is in a veterinarian's best interest to take CE courses in topics pertinent to their career, so small animal practitioners frequently attend CE in nutrition, since making sure their patients are eating healthy is a big part of the job.

### **Do “Big Pet Food” salespeople teach veterinary nutrition courses?**

No.

Course directors vary by school and who teaches specific courses depends on available staff. Many schools are fortunate enough to employ one or more [board-certified veterinary nutritionists](#), but some rely on a PhD or MS animal nutritionist to teach their veterinary students. Some course directors will bring in outside “guest lecturers” who are experts in their field. Guest lecturers are often visiting faculty from another university but could be a research scientist in either the Pet Food or Pharmaceutical industries. These are not salespeople and are required to disclose any potential biases to the school and the students.

### **Do vets and vet students get free food and kickbacks from “Big Pet Food”?**

Veterinary students, veterinarians, and other clinic staff may have the opportunity to buy discounted food (for their personal pets) from certain pet food companies. Discounts may range from 10-50% off the retail price, but food is never free. This program is designed to promote familiarity with how these foods work in their personal pets.

Veterinarians are not paid bonuses or incentives by pet food companies to stock and sell their food. Similar to other retailers (like pet stores), veterinary clinics buy food at “cost” from the manufacturer or a distributor so that they have a food readily available for pet owners when they are in for an appointment. Clinics ordering these foods will [mark them up](#) a certain percentage so they can cover the costs associated with stocking and dispensing of these items. Veterinarians who stock drugs and [therapeutic diets](#) do so as a convenience to their clients, and to ensure patient care or treatment is not delayed. In turn, the client receives a product that is guaranteed to have been stored, handled, and dispensed properly.

Sometimes, certain conditions do not require an immediate diet change, and if the veterinarian has limited space the cost of stocking pet food (and even some drugs) is not worth any nominal return, so veterinarians choose to write prescriptions or make suggestions for foods that can be purchased

somewhere else. When veterinarians send pet owners elsewhere, they do not make any money off the products they suggest. Instead, the pet store or online pharmacy makes a profit, which are often much higher than any markups at veterinary clinics.

### **Why do pet food companies employ veterinarians?**

Pet food companies that are based in science and perform quality research employ both board-certified veterinary nutritionists and other DVMs. They may also have specialists like veterinary [toxicologists](#) or [internists](#) on staff. They employ these experts because they want to produce a product that is safe and effective.

### **So, should I trust my veterinarian's nutrition recommendations?**

Your veterinarian should take the time to get a good understanding of your pet's nutrition history, [body condition](#), and health status. The [AVMA's nutrition policies](#) is also a resource veterinarians use to stay up-to-date on current best practices for nutrition. Veterinarians who give recommendations backed by science and that take into account the individual needs of the patient and the caregivers can help keep your dog or cat healthy for years to come.