

What to consider when shopping for dog treats

By Mili Godio

Many pet owners love to spoil their dogs with [toys](#) and treats, especially when they need a boost of energy or a reward for good behavior. Dogs love treats for a variety of reasons, but mostly because they deviate from their regular [dog food](#). “It’s different [than what they’re used to], whether it’s due to the smell, flavor or texture,” says Caylee Freels, a licensed veterinary technician at [VCA White Lake Animal Hospital](#).

But if you’ve just been giving your pup scraps from your dinner plate, you might want to rethink [what you’re feeding your dog](#) — and how much you’re feeding them. Human food, even in small treat-sized amounts, can take up too many of your pet’s daily calories and quickly add up to extra pounds, according to our experts.

Treats that are specifically formulated for dogs have the number of calories clearly stated on the label, so you don’t have to worry about overfeeding them. To help you choose the right ones, we consulted veterinarians and pet experts about how to shop for the best dog treats and compiled their recommendations and Select staff favorites to consider.

SKIP AHEAD [The best dog treats](#) | [How to shop for dog treats](#)

Selected. Our top picks



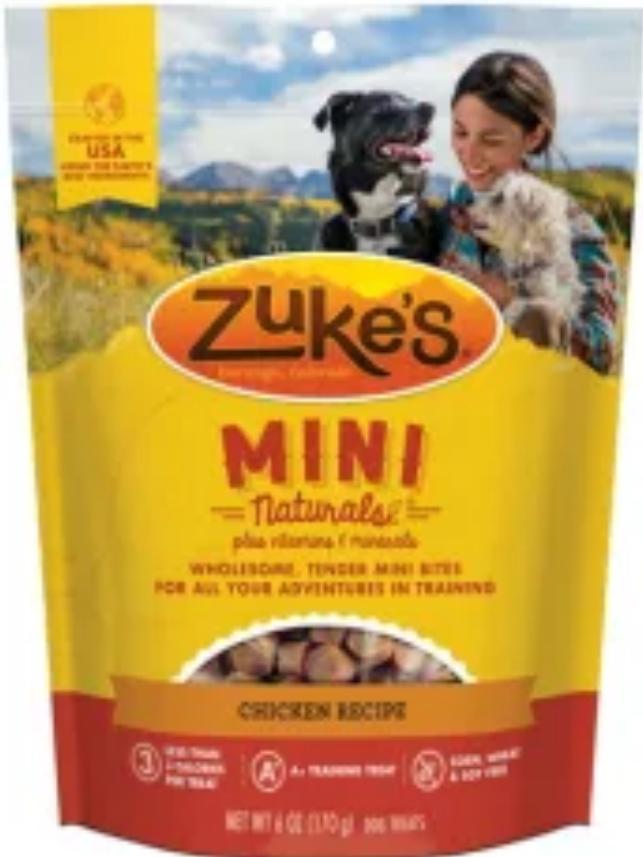
Best overall treats

[Learn more](#)



Best dental chews

[Learn more](#)



Best training treats

[Learn more](#)



Best treat sticks

[Learn more](#)

How we chose the best dog treats

Treats should only be considered as one part of your dog's daily diet, which means you should give them in moderation to avoid going over your pup's recommended calorie count. Below are a few factors our experts recommend keeping in mind when shopping for dog treats:

Nutritional balance: Look for treats that clearly state the number of calories in each one and include feeding recommendations on the packaging. You can also keep an eye out for the [Association of Feed Control Officials'](#) (AAFCO) nutritional adequacy label on the bag, but unlike [dog food](#), not all treats are required to have that label on their packaging ([more on that below](#)).

Ingredients: There are a few ingredients to avoid that will potentially irritate your dog's stomach: artificial sweeteners like xylitol, artificial colors, excessive salt (which will make them thirsty) and syrups and molasses (which are high in sugar), says Freels. Consider treats that contain dog-safe fruits and vegetables like carrots, green beans, apples and bananas that offer very few calories and have good nutritional value, experts say.

Size: Choose a treat that's proportional to your dog's size — giving your dog a treat that's too big or too small for them can turn into a choking hazard, according to our experts. You can also break up larger biscuits to cut down on the calories per treat, says Dr. Kristen Nelson, a board-certified veterinarian author of "[Coated With Fur: A Vet's Life](#)."

The best dog treats

In line with our experts' guidance, each of the following dog treats features a nutrition label on its packaging that indicates the number of calories and fat content per serving as well as the ingredients. Most of them also come in different sizes (or can be broken up into smaller pieces) to accommodate different size dogs and breeds.

[Hill's Natural Baked Light Small Biscuits](#)



These chicken-flavored, low-calorie dog treats received a [Select Best for Your Pet Award](#) because they're highly palatable while not adding extra calories to your pet's diet. A healthier alternative to higher-calorie treats (which can have negative health impacts over time), these biscuits don't contain corn or artificial colors and flavors, according to the brand. Opting for low-calorie treats like these can keep your pet within the AAFCO-recommended daily nutrition intake, according to our experts. It comes in two bag sizes: small and [medium](#).

[Zuke's Mini Naturals Chicken Recipe Dog Training Treats](#)



The Zuke's Mini Naturals treats are a great training treat option, according to Nelson. They come in tiny morsels, so you don't have to break them up as you're working with your dog on a new skill. Mini Naturals are wheat-free and corn-free for dogs who may have stomach sensitivities or allergies, and they contain no added animal fat, artificial colors or artificial flavors, according to the brand.

[Greenies Regular Dog Dental Treats](#)



These [dental treats](#) have a stamp of approval from the [Veterinary Oral Health Council](#), which means a group of veterinary dentists and dental scientists reviewed data from the manufacturer's trials and confirmed that the treats reduce plaque and tartar build-up. Our experts say the treats can help maintain gum health as well as help freshen your pup's breath. They're also made with easy-to-digest ingredients, vitamins and minerals, according to the brand. I feed the brand's [Teeny Greenies](#) to my 5-year-old havachon Bella, who weighs 15 pounds, and she's never had any issues with her teeth (she also loves the taste of them).

[Kong Easy Treat](#)



This semi-soft peanut butter-flavored treat from Kong — which makes some of our experts' favorite [dog toys](#) — comes in a dispenser that works like spray cheese, so you can put it inside of a chew toy to keep your dog entertained. You can also place a treat-filled toy in the freezer before handing it to your pup to make it last longer, according to the brand.

[SmartBones SmartSticks Beef Chews Dog Treats](#)



Bella loves these SmartBones sticks, which are chewy enough to keep her entertained for several minutes, yet not too hard for her teeth. A healthy alternative to rawhide treats, which experts say can be a choking hazard, these chews are low in fat, great for maintaining healthy teeth and come in a highly palatable beef flavor, according to the brand. They're also available in flavors like [chicken](#) and [peanut butter](#).

[Blue Buffalo Blue Bits Dog Treats](#)



These meat-flavored training treats from Blue Buffalo — which Select social editor Sadhana Daruvuri feeds her 1-year-old maltipoo, Bandit — can be great for both puppies and adult dogs. They are formulated with omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids to help maintain your dog's skin and coat health and don't contain soy, wheat or artificial flavors and preservatives, according to Blue Buffalo. They also come in a portable bag to take them on the go, Daruvuri says.

[Pet Botanics Training Reward Bacon-Flavored Dog Treats](#)



These Pet Botanics dog treats — which are just 3 calories each — are made with real pork liver, according to the brand. I give Bella these treats when teaching her new commands and to reward good behavior. She loves the bacon flavor and since they come as small, low-calorie pellets, I can give her multiple treats at a time while still keeping track of her nutritional intake for the day.

[Rachael Ray Nutrish Burger Bites](#)



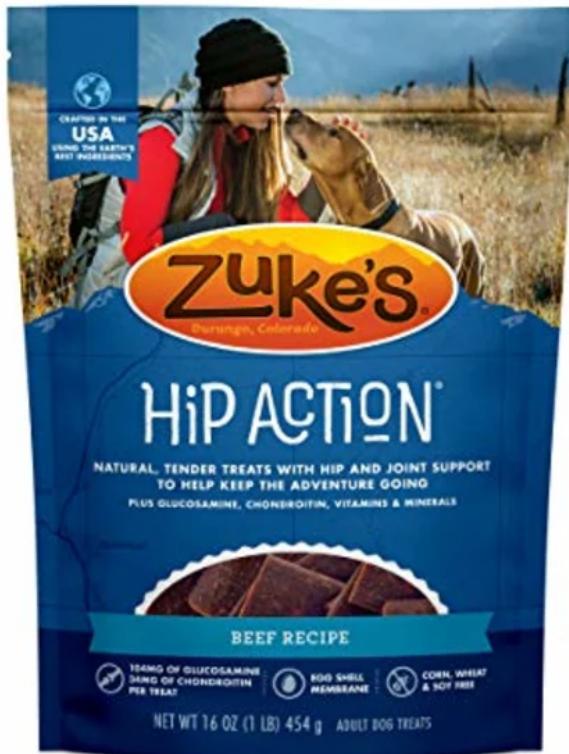
These beef-flavored Rachel Ray Nutrish dog treats are a favorite of Daruvuri's Bandit, who also loves the [roasted chicken-flavored](#) ones from the brand. The treats are soft enough to break apart easily for smaller dogs and are made without artificial flavors or meat by-products for sensitive stomachs, according to the brand.

[Pup-Peroni Rounds Beef Brisket Dog Treats](#)



Select manager of editorial operations [Shari Uyehara](#) feeds her 2-year-old cavalier King Charles spaniel, Loki, these beef brisket treats, and she says he loves the flavor and texture. They're made with real beef and come with a fun, round shape that resembles real human-grade pepperoni. The treats contain no artificial flavors, fillers or added grains, according to the brand.

[Zuke's Hip Action Hip & Joint Natural Dog Treats](#)



Another option from Zuke's, these treats come in both beef and [chicken](#) flavors and are good for dogs with joint issues, according to the brand. Select associate updates editor [Zoe Malin](#) feeds these to her 10-year-old yellow lab Chance because they contain egg shell membrane, which can help improve hip and joint health, according to Zuke's. These soft treats also contain antioxidant-rich whole food berries as well as essential vitamins and minerals for dogs.

[Old Mother Hubbard Original Mix Oven-Baked Dog Treats](#)



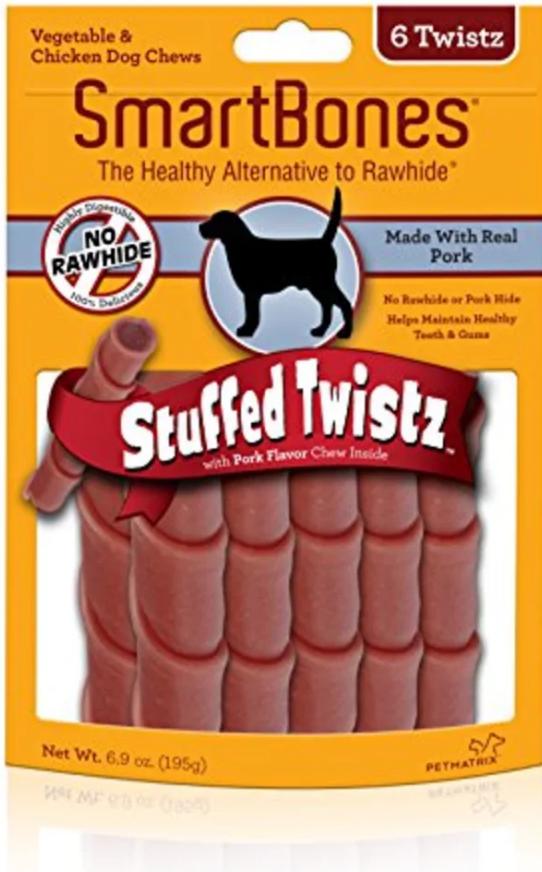
Old Mother Hubbard offers a variety of fun treat flavors, ranging from [peanut butter and apples](#) to [bacon and cheddar cheese](#). I give this small-sized assorted mix to Bella, who loves the diversity of the flavors. This mix comes with the brand's original flavor, along with chicken, cheddar and Char Tar (a mixture of oatmeal, apples and carrots).

[Spot Farms Turkey Meatball Recipe With Cranberries](#)



These treats from Spot Farms contain a blend of turkey (the first ingredient), high-fiber rolled oats, honey and cranberries. Free from fillers, artificial flavors, preservatives and colors, you can give these treats to your dog whole or split them up into small training-sized treats to give throughout the day, according to the brand. They're also highly rated, with a 4.6-star average rating from over 1,100 reviews on Amazon.

[SmartBones Pork Stuffed Twistz](#)



These rawhide-free treats from Select staff-favorite brand SmartBones are filled with a pork-flavored chew center to add a surprise boost of palatability for your canine friend. They're also made with real chicken and vegetables, and enriched with vitamins and minerals that make digesting them easier, according to the brand. SmartBones also offers a [peanut butter option](#) with a pork-flavored center, as well as [beef](#) and [chicken-flavored](#) options. If you have a smaller dog, you may want to consider the brand's [mini treats](#), instead — these chew sticks could be hard for them to break into pieces.

How to shop for dog treats

Treats should only be given in moderation, which may mean your dog doesn't get them on a daily basis. "Too many treats can interfere with the balance of your pet's core diet — it's recommended that treats make up no more than 10% of a pet's daily calorie intake," says [Dr. Lori Teller](#), a board-certified veterinarian and former president of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

To determine what treats are best for your dog, our pet experts recommend looking at the ingredients, size and calorie count of each treat. They also discussed other types of treats — like dental treats and grain-free options — and whether they can actually benefit your pup's overall health.

Determine nutritional balance

It's important to remember that treats aren't usually designed to be nutritionally balanced. The biggest consideration when it comes to researching treats for your dog is how to add them into your dog's diet: "If you start feeding your dog a lot of treats and cut back on their kibble, you start running into nutrient deficiencies," says [Dr. Joe Wakshlag](#), professor of clinical nutrition and sports medicine and rehabilitation at Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine.

Too many treats can also result in diarrhea and occasional vomiting, so it's important to choose brands that clearly state the calories contained in each treat and include feeding recommendations on the back of the packaging, according to Freels. If you're in doubt, The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center also offers a handy [daily calorie calculator](#) for pets.

If you want to be extra sure the treats you're feeding your dog are healthy, look for the AAFCO nutritional adequacy label (which is usually in small print on the bag). However, unlike dog food, treats don't have to have the AAFCO label on their packaging — the association says it recognizes that [treat products](#) don't meet the nutritional adequacy requirements for a complete and balanced meal, which is why they must clearly display the terms "snack" or "treat" on the front label.

[**Analyzing good \(and bad\) ingredients**](#)

Dog parents should avoid artificial sweeteners like xylitol in the dog treats they buy, says Freels. Other things to avoid include artificial colors, excessive salt (which will increase thirst) and syrups and molasses (which are high in sugar). Be mindful of foods like grapes or raisins, which can be healthy for people but toxic to dogs, says Nelson. If you're not sure about a certain food, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) maintains a [list of foods](#) that can be harmful to your pet.

If you want to reduce their calorie intake, dog-safe fruits and vegetables — including bell pepper, carrots, green beans, apples and bananas, to name a few — offer very few calories and have some good nutrition to them, according to Wakshlag. "And it's not diluting down the calories that they get from their food — those are things you can get a lot more of as treats than commercial treats or pieces of steak that are going to be calorie dense," he says.

[**Find the right-sized dog treat**](#)

While watching a puppy struggle with an oversized bone looks adorable, giving a dog a treat that's too big or too small for them can be dangerous. "The size of the treat should be proportional to the size of your dog — very small dogs shouldn't have large treats and [vice versa]," says Nelson. Keep an eye on your dog while they're chewing larger treats like rawhide chews that can break apart and turn into choking hazards, and break up big biscuits to cut down on the calories per treat, too, she says.

Size also depends on what you are using the treat for: training versus mental stimulation or

enrichment. Training treats are going to be very small, which means more can be given as a reward for positive behavior. Regular treats, on the other hand, are larger in size, such as bully sticks, bones and dog chews, and should be used only for enrichment or mental stimulation, according to Freels. Too much of a large treat can cause GI Issues, so these enrichment treats should be given less regularly. If you're using treats for training, "very small treats — the size of a thumb nail — are going to be best so more can be given without causing any GI indiscretion," says Freels.

Frequently asked questions

While regular brushing is the best way to keep your dog's gums and teeth free of plaque, dental treats can help tone down your dog's breath and clean their teeth. Look for the [Veterinary Oral Health Council](#) label, which indicates that the dental treat has met pre-set standards to help reduce tartar and plaque development on their teeth, says Freels.

You should also consider what type of chewer the dog is to see if they'd actually benefit from dental treats, according to our experts. If these treats aren't being fully chewed, you're likely better off scheduling annual professional dental cleanings, especially for smaller dogs who are more prone to dental problems, says Wakshlag. You should also be sure to count the number of calories in dental chews because they can add up fast.

A grain-free formula — which is made without wheat, barley, rye and corn — isn't usually better for your dog compared to a typical formula, and it can sometimes prevent them from getting their appropriate daily nutritional intake, experts told us. Carbohydrates, corn especially, can provide extra fiber for better digestion and important vitamins and minerals and antioxidants in your dog's diet, says Dr. Brian Roberts, a board-certified veterinarian and regional medical director in the Mid-Atlantic region with [VCA Animal Hospitals](#), in our guide to [dog food](#).

In 2018, the FDA opened an [investigation](#) to examine a potential link between grain-free diets and a heart condition called canine dilated cardiomyopathy. Nelson recommends avoiding grain-free treats but noted you should ultimately consult your veterinarian. "The grain-free phenomenon is a fad from human nutrition," she says. "When the grain is removed, other ingredients, like higher glycemic carbohydrates or fat, may be added — and those lead to other issues."

[Meet our experts](#)

At Select, we work with experts who have specialized knowledge and authority based on relevant training and/or experience. We also take steps to ensure all expert advice and recommendations are made independently and without undisclosed financial conflicts of interest.

Caylee Freels is a licensed veterinary technician at [VCA White Lake Animal Hospital](#).

Dr. Kristen Nelson is a board-certified veterinarian author of “[Coated With Fur: A Vet’s Life.](#)”

Dr. Lori Teller is a board-certified veterinarian and the former president of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Dr. Joe Wakshlag is a professor of clinical nutrition and sports medicine and rehabilitation at Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine.

Dr. Brian Roberts is a board-certified veterinarian and regional medical director in the Mid-Atlantic region with [VCA Animal Hospitals](#).

Why trust Select?

Mili Godio is an editor at Select who covers a variety of pet essentials, including [dog food](#), [travel carriers](#) and [shampoos](#). For this article, Godio spoke to five veterinarians and dog experts about how to shop for the best treats for your dog, including health considerations and nutritional value. She also compiled their recommendations for the best dog treats to consider, as well as options that Select staff give their own dogs.

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Mili Godio is an updates editor for Select on NBC News.

Jonathan Bender contributed.