



## **A SESSION WITH A NUTRITIONIST**

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### **Introduction**

No longer considered a luxury just for the celebrity elite, sessions with a nutritionist are now being scheduled by athletes, fitness professionals, and average people looking to improve their diets. Clients see nutritionists for a wide variety of reasons, from disease prevention to weight loss, to athletic performance improvement. This article reviews what a typical visit with a nutritionist includes, some average fees, and some advice on how to find the right nutritionist for your needs.

### **Where to start**

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have your own nutritionist? Once thought of as a luxury reserved for movie stars and elite athletes, non-celebs are seeking the counsel of nutritionists for everything from disease prevention to weight management to athletic performance enhancement.

Research studies examining the efficacy of dietetic counseling, often use a

reduction in health risks as a measurement for success [\[1-4\]](#) . Many of these studies demonstrate a measurable improvement in clinical outcome when counsel from a registered dietitian is included in the treatment plan.

Before consulting the services of a nutritionist, clients should know how to recognize valid credentials. As per the NASM article titled “Nutrition Advice: Take it or leave it, but should you give it out?” [DATE], it is important to know how to recognize a true nutrition professional from a fraud. The Registered Dietitian (R.D.) credential is available to individuals who obtain a bachelor’s degree in nutrition, complete an American Dietetic Association (ADA) approved dietetic internship, and pass a comprehensive written test. RDs must keep their credentials current, just as fitness professionals keep their fitness certifications current, with continuing professional education (CPE). RDs also have varied employment, including corporate wellness, community and public health settings, sports nutrition, universities, medical centers, research areas, and many others. Although completion of a master’s degree and PhD are valuable to nutrition professionals, they are not required to become a Registered Dietitian.

Not all Registered Dietitians have experience in the area of sports nutrition, or even a solid understanding of the principles of fitness. Like many wellness disciplines, the field of sports nutrition is fairly specialized, and after identifying a local registered dietitian, it is important to assess the professional’s familiarity with the nutrition needs of active people.

Registered Dietitians can also take obtain additional Board Certifications in specialized areas like diabetes, renal disease and pediatrics. In 2005, the credentialing agency for the American Dietetic Association developed a **Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD) Exam**. The Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics is the premier professional sports nutrition credential in the U.S. Board Certified Sports Dietitians are registered dietitians for a minimum of three years who apply evidence-

based nutrition knowledge in exercise and sports. They assess, educate, and counsel athletes and active individuals. They design, implement, and manage safe and effective nutrition strategies that enhance lifelong health, fitness, and optimal performance. Being Board Certified as a Specialist in Sports Dietetics designates specific knowledge, skills, and expertise for competency in sports dietetics practice.

A helpful resource to locate registered dietitians is the American Dietetic Association's website at [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org). On the homepage you will find a "Find a Dietitian" search feature, which facilitates searches by city, state, zip code, and areas of expertise (among which is sports nutrition). Once you have selected a practitioner, you are provided with details on specialized practice areas and Specialty Boards for that dietitian.

### **What to ask**

If you decide to seek the advice of a dietitian, there are a few questions you can ask to insure that the practitioner is best matched to your needs. A 10-minute phone interview should be enough to help you determine whether this is the counselor for you.

You might first preface your questions with, *"I am a highly active person, and I would like to know that you are knowledgeable about sports nutrition and the physiological, behavioral, and logistical demands of food choices for very active people."*

Some questions that might help you determine if the nutritionist is right for you include:

- . Glycogen replacement?
- . You may want to ask questions about specific sports or types of training such as "Are you familiar with the physical demands of 4x100 freestyle"? or "Have you worked with an athlete in training for long-distance cycling or a physique competition?"

You may also want to ask more general questions about how the dietitian works. For example, “How frequently do you see clients?” and “How long is a session?” You may also want to determine if they give meal plans or focus more on nutrition education, or if they sell supplements or supplemental foods. You might ask if their client base is mostly adults or children, men or women. With this type of investigation, you will begin to get a sense of how the individual works, and whether it matches your expectation of the relationship and outcome.

### **What to expect**

While every dietitian has their own procedures and priorities, and each client has their own individual set of goals, there are standards of practice that most nutritionists follow. The first session (and sometimes even before with a pre-submit questionnaire/health history) is usually spent collecting information about the client that will help the nutritionist assess and develop a plan. The information collected should include a general health and wellness assessment, a review of pertinent medical records if available (i.e. lab work, bone scans, MD reports, etc.), and a detailed discussion of goals and objectives.

To best assist the nutritionist, clients should plan to answer questions including:

What do you hope to achieve from this relationship?

- 0. Of those goals you listed, can you put them in priority order?
- 0. Have you ever worked with a nutritionist before and did you consider it successful?
- 0. Are there any concerns you have about working with a nutritionist?

### **Developing a Plan**

Once the nutritionist has collected a thorough health history, current medical information, and the self-reported goals and objectives of the

client, a plan is developed. The plan should be specific to the goals of the client. A nutrition plan for running a marathon is going to look different from a nutrition plan for weight loss.

It is important for the client to communicate his/her expectations as early as possible. For example, if you are training for an event, the expectations and training time line should be developed early on. One of the most common complaints of clients in unsuccessful relationships with nutritionists is that the counseling did not seem focused enough on the goals or on the timeline. The timelines developed must be realistic and attainable. For example, a weight loss client should not hope to lose 30 pounds in a month. A marathon training client should not expect last minute nutrition to compensate for inadequate training.

### **Expectation and Readiness**

Like working with a personal trainer, the client/dietitian partnership should focus on the development of realistic expectations. The goals and timelines should be agreed upon, and then written down into a contract. From this contract, clients can better understand the changes that will be expected of them, and counselors can develop a step-by-step intervention that will help support these goals. In a well publicized study on weight loss and expectation [5], Foster demonstrates that often the expectation is disproportionate to the probable outcome. Sixty obese female subjects were asked how much weight they would need to lose to reach their “dream weight,” an “acceptable weight,” as well as a weight with which they would be “disappointed.” After 12 months, forty-seven percent did not achieve the amount of weight loss that they had previously defined as “disappointing.” None of the subjects achieved the amount of weight loss needed to achieve their “dream weight” and only 24% of subjects reached a weight they had previously defined as “acceptable.”

By setting realistic expectations through honest communication, you and the dietitian will be able to troubleshoot maladaptive behaviors and replace

them with those that are health promoting, while meeting reasonable and mutually developed goals.

### **Some tools of the trade**

#### The Food Diary

Most dietitians will ask for a food diary, but these may differ in length and in type or amount of detail required. In essence, it is very difficult to help someone with their diet unless there is disclosure of what is being eaten. Research on recall (trying to remember what is eaten in the past) demonstrates that it is very difficult to accurately remember all foods eaten even several hours later. There remains a significant amount of underreporting on food diaries [6], but with good direction, the food diary can provide a valuable snap shot of how the client eats, as well as improve client accountability and awareness of what is actually being eaten.

#### Measurements

If there is a weight gain or loss goal, dietitians will use different measurements devices to establish a baseline and periodically measure progress. These include scale weight, body composition data, and anthropometric measurements. The validity of repeat measurements depends on the frequency of measuring, as well as intra and inter-operator error in the case of measurements with skin-fold calipers.

#### Nutrition Education Materials

There are a wide variety of materials a dietitian may use to help clients meet their goals. From healthy food lists, to meal plans, to a carefully time-lined plan with topics and sometimes readings and workbook exercises, each dietitian works differently in terms of the amount and format of information they deliver.

#### Supplements

The American Dietetic Association has a Code of Ethics that specifically addresses the sale of supplements by dietetic professionals. It is imperative that RDs avoid bias in the recommendation of supplements, so that patient need, and not financial gain, is the sole motivation for the recommendation. Additionally, the dietetics professional must provide disclosure of any financial relationship regarding the sale of dietary supplements to patients/clients. The dietetics professional must disclose any financial arrangements with specific manufacturer(s) or supplier(s) to sell dietary supplements. Many RDs choose not to sell products to avoid this potential conflict. They can make a recommendation when necessary to supplement the diet with an appropriate product, based on a thorough review of the currently available scientific evidence, without jeopardizing scope of practice or ethics.

### **Follow-up**

For some clients, a single session is enough to identify problems and solutions and provide enough direction for self-guided dietary improvement. For others, an ongoing relationship will be necessary to accomplish the considerable dietary changes that require more time, education, and reinforcement.

### **Fees**

Fees vary significantly from location to location, and even within a given city. Most sessions with an RD cost between \$75 – \$125. Part of this is a market driven price, in cities where these types of services are highly desired the costs may be higher. Additionally, once an RD specializes and develops a reputation in that specific field, s/he may charge more for their services. Unless the visit is a documented Medication Nutrition Therapy (MNT) session, most out-patient RD visits are not covered by health insurance, though some progressive companies have “allied health care” portions of their policy that cover preventative care delivered by chiropractors, dietitians, and other wellness providers.

## Summary

Many fitness professionals and recreational fitness participants are scheduling sessions with a nutritionist to try to make meaningful and science-based improvements in their diets. Whether for disease prevention, energy enhancement, or to optimize performance, a registered dietitian can make an enormous impact on health and performance.

## SIDE BAR

### *How to create a winning partnership between dietitian and client*

**First**, be as honest and direct with the dietitian as possible. Clearly state your expectations, with timelines, early on in the relationship. If the counselor does not find them realistic, it is his/her obligation to address that early on as well.

**Second**, understand that dietitians can educate, provide tools and strategies about nutrients, but they can not eat for the client. Just like a fitness professional can only accomplish so much during a training session, the client is responsible for implementing the information once the session is over.

**Third**, it helps if you enjoy the counselor's communication style. Many people go to dietitians because they feel that their diet is sub-optimal – and they often feel self-conscious about it. It can be difficult to be completely honest about dietary habits sometimes. Good dietitians are essentially “shock-proof” and completely non-judgmental. They will help you identify problem areas in the diet, but not denounce you as a person. Don't take it personally.

## References

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### **Glossary of terms**

**American Dietetic Association** – The nation's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. ADA serves the public by promoting optimal nutrition, health and well-being. ADA members are the nation's food and nutrition experts, translating the science of nutrition into practical solutions for healthy living.

**Code of Ethics**– A set of conventional principles and expectations that are considered binding on any person who is a member of a particular group.

**Glycogen** – A polysaccharide,  $(C_6H_{10}O_5)_n$ , that is the main form of carbohydrate storage in animals and occurs primarily in the liver and

muscle tissue. It is readily converted to glucose as needed by the body to satisfy its energy needs. Also called *animal starch*.

**Glycogen Supercompensation** (carbohydrate loading) – A dietary practice that increases carbohydrate reserves in muscle tissue through the consumption of extra quantities of high-starch foods. Some marathoners and other endurance athletes follow this practice prior to competition.

**Intraoperator Error** – the degree of error between repeat measurements taken by the same measurer.

**Interoperator Error** – The degree of error between measurements taken by different measurers.

**Registered Dietitian** – The Commission on Dietetic Registration defines the Registered Dietitian (RD) as an individual who: (1) has completed the minimum of a Baccalaureate degree granted by a U.S. regionally accredited college or university, or equivalent; (2) has met current minimum academic requirements (Didactic Program in Dietetics) as approved by the Commission on Accreditation/Approval for Dietetics Education of the American Dietetic Association; (3) has completed pre-professional experience accredited/approved by the Commission on Accreditation/Approval for Dietetics Education of the American Dietetic Association; (4) has successfully completed the Registration Examination for Dietitians; (5) has the annual registration maintenance fee; and (6) has accrued 75 hours of approved continuing professional education within a specific five-year reporting period.

**Skin Fold Caliper** – a pair of calipers used to form and measure the thickness of skinfolds in order to estimate the amount of body fat – usually used in plural.

