



REGISTERED DIETITIAN VS NUTRITIONIST
Will the “Real” Nutrition Professional Please Stand Up?
By Katherine A. Beals, PhD, RD

Perhaps you’re looking to boost your physical performance; or maybe you want to drop a few extra pounds. What if you just want to learn how to eat healthier? When you’re in need of nutrition advice, who should you turn to?

A registered dietitian?

A nutritionist?

Who’s the qualified nutritional professional?

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Although often used interchangeably, “registered dietitian” is *not* synonymous with “nutritionist.” Nutritionist is not a professionally regulated term—there are no minimum academic or training qualifications; which means that anyone can use the title “nutritionist” and dispense nutrition advice, even if they have absolutely no background in nutrition. In contrast, registered dietitian is a professionally regulated term. The registered dietitian credential is earned by completing a minimum of a four-year nutrition degree in an American Dietetic Association accredited program; a minimum of 900 hours of supervised practice experience in dietetics, and the successful passage of the nationally administered board exam. In addition, the registered dietitian is required to complete 75 hours of approved continuing education credits every five years to maintain their registration.¹

A certified nutritionist means about as much as a certified dentist or certified cardiologist - it means absolutely nothing.

A LICENSE TO PRACTICE?

Currently some, but not all states provide licensure to nutrition professionals, limiting the use of a particular title, such as dietitian, to those meeting certain academic and training requirements ([click here](#) to download an additional PDF with statistics on page 9). However,

few states mandate that only licensed nutritional professionals can provide nutritional counseling. It seems ironic that there are licenses regulating the practice of over 100 professionals from manicurist and barber to mortician, yet, in many states anyone can call them self a nutritionist and dispense nutrition advice. You should also be aware that certification is not the same as licensure.

FIRST, DO NO HARM

A significant concern of unqualified nutrition professionals dispensing nutrition advice is the propensity for nutrition misinformation. Nutritional claims without scientific support, nutritional guidance provided with or without malicious intent, misinterpretation or misrepresentation of nutrition science all qualify as nutrition misinformation.² Such misinformation can be used to fuel food faddism, quackery, health fraud, and can negatively impact the health and economic status of consumers.

Misinformed consumers are placing themselves at significant nutritional and health risks by not only delaying appropriate, effective healthcare but replacing it with products, procedures or behaviors that are, at best, ineffective, and at worst harmful to their health. In addition, as many of the products and services promoted by unqualified nutrition practitioners are expensive, nutrition misinformation may cause excessive financial burden to the consumer.²

Unlike unqualified nutrition practitioners who often use testimonials and unpublished or fabricated research to support their claims, registered dietitians use evidenced-based practice that is supported by data published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

Nutrition misinformation poses a serious threat to public health and if you're an athlete, to your performance, too.

SPORTS SPECIFIC PRACTITIONERS

Nutrition “experts” abound in the athletic arena; yet few of these self-proclaimed experts would qualify as such based on academic training and professional practice. While few athletes would consider taking strength training or fitness advice from a dietitian, many have no problem taking nutrition advice from a strength coach, personal trainer or equally unqualified individual.

The term sport nutritionist has historically been used to designate the individual with a specialty in sport nutrition. Unfortunately, just like its more generic counterpart — nutritionist — sport nutritionist isn't a professionally regulated term. Thus, until recently, there was no way to distinguish the qualified sport nutrition practitioner from one who was not qualified.

In 2005, the Sports, Cardiovascular, and Wellness (SCAN) practice group of the American Dietetic Association created a specialty subunit—[Sports Dietetics USA](#)—to address the specific nutritional needs and issues of athletes and active individuals. Sports Dietetics USA is comprised of registered dietitians with expertise in the area of sport nutrition. To be registered as a sports dietitian, registered dietitians must complete sport nutrition-specific academic training, a minimum number professional practice hours (i.e., individual or group education/counseling) in sport nutrition, and pass a national sport nutrition registration exam.

The scope of nutrition misinformation is likely no place more pervasive than in sports.

BUYER BEWARE

Much of the nutrition information obtained from the local health food store or in the neighborhood gym is free; a wise person once said, “you get what you pay for.” Even if the information dispensed isn't free, the consumer would be wise to evaluate the information:

- **The Source** — is it from a qualified nutrition professional (i.e., registered dietitian) or one that lacks appropriate qualifications (i.e., a nutritionist, personal trainer, strength coach, etc.)
- **The Content** — is it credible? You should seek to determine if the information is supported by scientific research published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

If the answer to either or both of these questions is no, then your health and sports performance will likely take a hit.

REFERENCES

1. American Dietetic Association. www.eatright.org
2. Position of the American Dietetic Association: Food and Nutrition Misinformation. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 2002;102:260-266.

BIOGRAPHY

Katherine A. Beals, PhD, RD, FACSM is an Associate Professor (clinical) in the Division of Nutrition and Department of Family Practice and Preventive Medicine at the University of Utah. She is also the director of the University of Utah Nutrition Clinic which services University of Utah Athletics as well as university faculty, staff, students, and the greater Salt Lake community. Prior to the University of Utah, she held an academic appointment as an Associate Professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Ball State University in Muncie, IN.

She holds a PhD in Exercise Science and Physical Education from Arizona State University, is a Registered Dietitian, and a fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine. She has published over a dozen articles on disordered eating and the female athlete triad and recently published a book entitled [*Disordered Eating Among Athletes: A Comprehensive Guide for Health Professionals*](#).

Dr. Beals is a competitive triathlete, distance runner, and, master's swimmer.