



Offering Nutrition Advice: What You Can and Can't Do

Use your certification to transform your clients' lives — without going beyond your scope of practice



AFPA

HEALTH, NUTRITION & FITNESS

Nutrition Advice Guidelines

As people aim to live healthier, happier, and more robust lives – nutrition is key. As an aspiring nutrition professional, there is so much you can do to guide people on their journey to better health. That said – the guidelines for what advice you can safely and ethically give will vary depending on the title you earn.

Take, for example, a Registered Dietician and a Nutritionist. While they sound very similar, their educational requirements, workplaces, and job duties can vary a lot – and therefore the scope of advice you can give will also vary.

Here at AFPA, we want you to choose the path (and title) that'll make you happiest and the most fulfilled. Understanding the scope of advice you can give is but one facet of the knowledge AFPA equips you with before you make a decision about which of our award-winning certification programs to enroll in.

Once you are certified, giving out advice will be a key component of your day-to-day. Here are some guidelines on how you can do that safely, effectively, and appropriately.



What You Can Do

More often than not, people who pursue a [nutrition certification](#) are passionate about health and wellness and want to use that passion to help others. But getting educated is just the start of your exciting journey as a nutrition professional. Here are a few of the ways you can (and should) utilize your certification:

Assess and evaluate: The most important way to track progress? Understand where a client is now. With your certification, you can evaluate factors that play into your clients' health such as what a "normal" day of eating looks like for them, their physical activity, stress levels, digestion, sleep patterns, and medical history. You also may consider their weight and age, which can be contributing factors when it comes to formulating nutritional advice.

As a certified nutrition professional, understanding the full picture of your clients' health will empower you to develop recommendations that suit them individually. Their initial evaluation will also act as a baseline for you to set goals, celebrate milestones, and develop a comprehensive strategy.

Develop meal plans: Meal plans, including selecting recipes, shopping for ingredients, and prepping meals, are key for a nutrition professional's and client's success. Think of these tasks as a roadmap for your clients to use to guide them on their way to improved health. Depending on your approach, this could look like a loose outline of meals and snacks for the next few days - perhaps incorporating more fresh, whole foods. Or, your approach can be more complex and in-depth - timing meals according to exercise routines or medication schedules, for example.

The knowledge you acquire when you earn your certificate will help you create custom plans to meet your clients' goals and needs. The plan you develop for a marathon runner likely won't be the same as the plan for someone who is simply looking to reduce sugar intake.



Go food shopping with clients: Client education is a huge part of nutritional consultation. Although clients may appreciate specific recommendations at the start of working together, most ultimately want to know how to make their own decisions about healthy food choices.

Taking a trip to the grocery store with your client is a great way to do some hands-on teaching. Head to the produce aisle to introduce them to new fruits and vegetables. Perhaps you can demonstrate what to look for when choosing broccoli or how to tell if an avocado is ripe, for example. Food shopping is also the perfect opportunity to educate your clients on how to read food labels and really understand factors that make a difference such as serving sizes, ingredients, and how much nutritional value a food may have.

Most importantly - removing the mystery around what exactly qualifies as “healthy” food makes it more likely clients will naturally gravitate toward those choices next time they shop.



Teach workshops and classes: As you know, education is essential in helping people make real changes in their lives. As a nutrition professional, you can develop and teach workshops about nutrition and the role it plays in a healthy lifestyle.

By educating multiple people at once, you'll make a wide-reaching impact (and possibly even find new clients!). You may consider teaching at a community center, school, gym, co-op, farmers' market or senior living center - anywhere you might be able to find a diverse set of students.

Provide recommendations based on evidence: When it comes to nutrition, recommendations should always be supported with scientific evidence. As part of your coursework, you'll learn how to evaluate research and use it to shape the advice you give. With so much inaccurate information out there, it's essential for nutrition professionals to be able to make the distinction between fact and fiction.

By evaluating research and scientific evidence, you'll be able to build a foundational knowledge of nutrition and how it relates to wellness, food behaviors, disease, physical activity, and behavioral change. These skills also make it possible for you to provide recommendations that go beyond what to eat. Think efficacy of nutritional supplements, whether or not a new diet is effective, or how sleep patterns affect metabolism.



Suggest ways to incorporate nutrition with other lifestyle changes: As you probably already know, nutrition is a huge piece of the puzzle, but it isn't everything when it comes to improving your clients' health. As a society, we're becoming increasingly open to a more holistic view of health. As part of learning about nutritional research and information, you'll also have unique insight into how nutrition affects other aspects of your clients' lives. Because of that, you can make suggestions that are about far more than what's on a plate.

Think of a client who has a very demanding corporate job. She's stressed out, always traveling, gets between 4–6 hours of sleep a night, and subsists mainly on coffee and takeout. A savvy nutrition professional will be able to discern that her worries about fatigue and weight-gain probably aren't attributed to food choices alone.

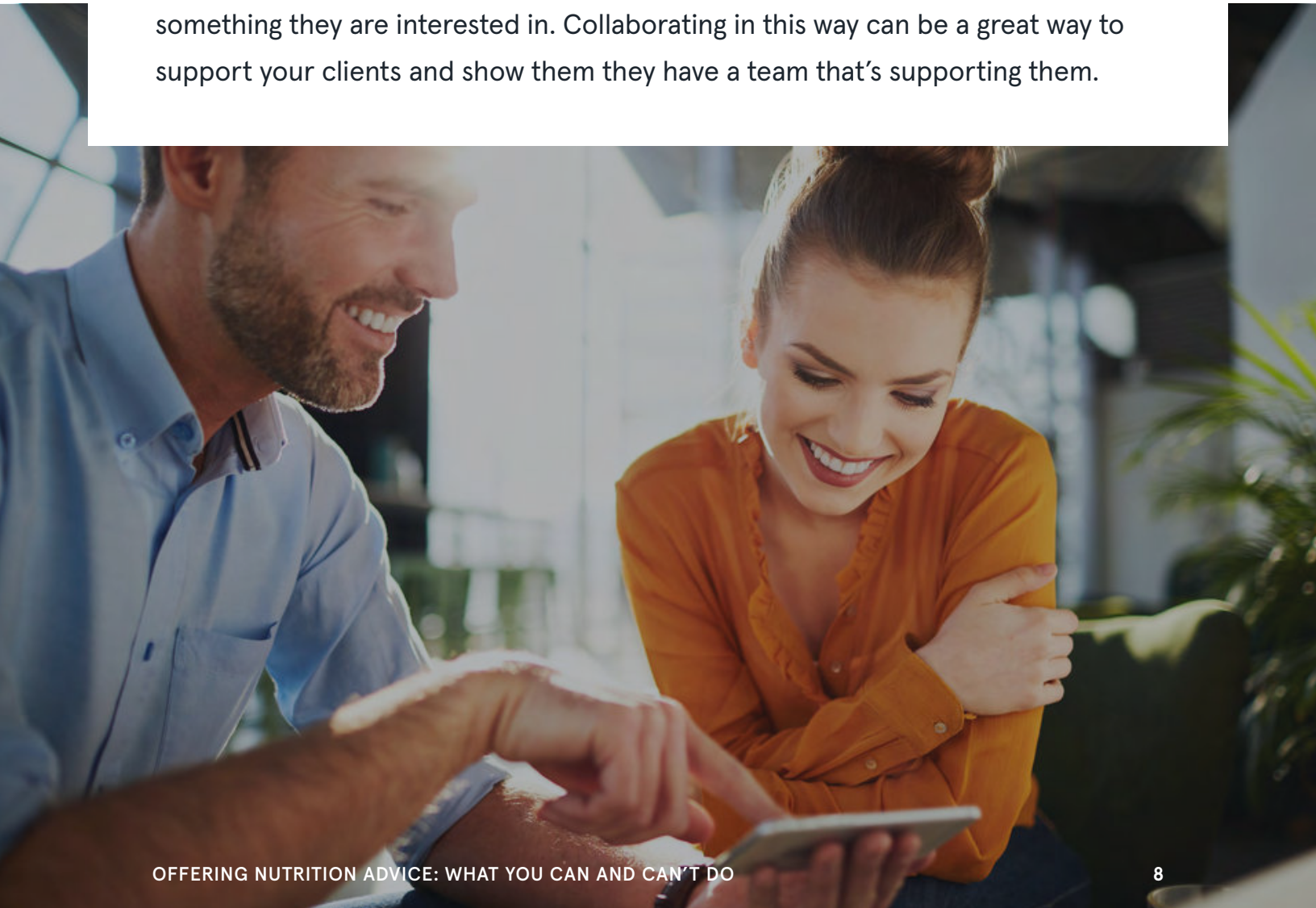
While sound nutrition recommendations are essential, you wouldn't just craft a nourishing meal plan and send her on her way. You'll also be able to articulate how nutritional changes can complement lifestyle shifts for better overall results. As you've learned while earning your certification, nutrition is rarely a standalone solution to a client's issues. You need to look at behavior, habits, and lifestyle — and more than that, you'll have the ability to have your client look at those aspects as well.

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Review lab results: While you won't be able to order lab tests, you can review the findings if a client provides them. For instance, a vitamin and mineral lab test might reveal deficiencies that could lead to recommendations about certain foods that can help fill the void or share scientific research on nutritional wellness supplementation.

Many people feel confused or overwhelmed by lab results when they get them. As a nutrition professional, you won't be able to answer all of their questions — unless you moonlight as a radiologist or lab tech — but you can at least help them begin to understand their results at a basic level.

You'll also be able to consult with your clients' medical practitioners if that's something they are interested in. Collaborating in this way can be a great way to support your clients and show them they have a team that's supporting them.



Provide ongoing support: Although some clients will be looking for a quick engagement to address specific issues, many will benefit from a long-term relationship that will support them in many goals along the way.

What's wonderful about establishing a longer-term connection with a client is that you've already built rapport and can help them tackle numerous goals. For example, say a client comes to you for weight-loss help. Once he reaches his goal weight, he may have also incorporated other changes, such as adding in strength training and yoga. He may need new insight to help him reach his next set of goals - such as lifting heavier or gaining more stamina. Or, perhaps his weight loss has allowed him to reduce his medication for a certain condition. He may want you to consult with his physician about how to bolster that change with good nutrition.

As a certified nutrition professional, you really have the opportunity to empower people and encourage them to take charge of their lives. Nutrition counseling is part art and part science - your training, insights, and recommendations all combine to steer clients toward the best results. As you spend time in the field, you'll see that the tactics listed here are only a few of the many strategies you can use.



What You Can't Do

Fortunately, the list of what you can't do as a nutritional professional is much shorter than what you can. Instead of viewing the list below as a set of limitations, consider them guidelines to keep in mind as you creatively guide your clients.

Practice medical nutrition or treat a disease: Those who have job titles such as “certified clinical nutritionist,” “registered dietitian,” and “registered dietitian nutritionist” may specialize in medical nutrition. Medical nutrition addresses specific health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and kidney disease, among many others. As a certified nutrition professional, you can develop meal plans that may ease symptoms of diagnosed conditions, but you can't say that you're treating them.

For example, you might offer a “heart-healthy diet” meal plan, but you can't tell a client that you're treating her heart disease directly through nutrition. The distinction here is subtle but very important. You're offering recommendations for nutritional changes but not a treatment for medical conditions.

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Steer clear from talking about “curing” a condition. Even if your nutrition advice reverses or eliminates a medical issue for a client – which happens quite frequently – be cautious in saying that you cured the issue. Instead, you can say that you provided advice and support that resulted in beneficial changes.

Make unproven health or nutrition claims: Science in the nutrition industry is always changing. While that’s wonderful in that it leads to new and innovative ways to help clients, the downside is that sometimes buzzworthy headlines are more marketing than science.

As a nutrition professional, you understand the importance of using evidence-based research and information to help clients. It’s better to stick to what’s been proven through rigorous methods rather than gravitating toward claims that might be questionable. When you’re on the fence about whether a health or nutrition claim is legitimate, do your research before sharing that with a client. And remember, the claim shouldn’t be one that implies medical treatment, diagnosis, or cure.

This methodology also applies to any methods, devices, assessments, or therapies you use with clients.



Use product sales in conjunction with client recommendations: There are many excellent, research-backed products on the market when it comes to nutrition support. But if there's a product you believe your clients could benefit from, have someone else do the selling.

Joining product sales with client recommendations has the potential to look like a biased approach. For example, a client may think you advised him to take a certain supplement because you also happen to be a sales representative for a company that manufactures the supplement. That thought can lead to loss of trust and skepticism that you actually have your client's best interest in mind.

Trust is everything when it comes to your client base. They need to fully believe you have their best interest in mind when they come to you looking for your advice and expertise. Eroding that trust in any way – through product sales, medical diagnoses, or promotion of unproven claims – can have a long-term and negative impact on your client relationships.

There is so much you can do while still sidestepping these potential pitfalls. Focus on building trust and maintaining it through assessments, recommendations, and support that is given in an appropriate and beneficial way.



State Guidelines

Specific rules can vary by state, especially when it comes to who can dispense nutrition advice that has a treatment-type basis. Before you begin practicing and taking on clients, it's essential to review the latest guidelines in your state since they can change without much public notice.

AFPA supports students in making sure they're informed on state regulations as a member school of The Council of Holistic Health Educators. This organization is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit, united to protect and grow the rights of holistic health educators, their students, and practitioners.



Using Your Insights

To learn more about certifications, including specifics on coursework, visit the [AFPA website](#). Our accredited certification programs are centered around what you need to know to succeed and are designed to meet the evolving needs of students in the nutrition field. [Our certification programs](#) focus on a range of topics such as holistic nutrition, sports nutrition, youth nutrition and so many more.

You can make a tangible difference in people's lives with a nutrition certification. Understanding what you can do and what you should avoid will help you make the best possible decisions for your career and clients.



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