

When to see a Registered Dietitian / Nutritionist

Fifteen years after the introduction of the first federal Food Guide Pyramid, aimed at helping people make more healthful dietary choices, Americans are fatter than ever and many are confused about just what they should eat and drink. Some people turn to personal nutritionists for help. Is customized dietary advice really worthwhile? Yes, though if it's not covered by your insurance, the price might be hard to swallow.

Nutrition intervention can help fight health problems, including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, digestive disorders, and weight issues. Dietary consultation is a good idea before and after pregnancy, and when caring for an aging parent. Even people who just want to eat smarter or improve their performance in sports can benefit from meal-planning advice. But check your dietary adviser's credentials first.

In many states, anyone can set up shop as a "nutritionist" without any qualifications. The safest approach is to seek a registered dietitian (look for the initials R.D.) because he or she has the academic requirements and clinical experience, has passed a national credentialing exam, and must stay current with continuing professional education. Here are some tips for avoiding pitfalls and getting the most from a personal nutritionist:

Get a referral. Most physicians don't have the time or training to dispense adequate dietary guidance, so ask for a referral to an R.D. Nutritionists typically charge \$50 to more than \$150 an hour, with the initial consultation lasting one to two hours. Most health plans will cover at least a portion of the cost of physician-recommended nutritional counseling, according to a spokesman for America's Health Insurance Plans, the major industry trade group. You can also find an R.D. in your area by going to the free Web site of the American Dietetic Association (ADA), the major group representing food and nutrition experts. Go to www.eatright.org and click on Find a Nutrition Professional.

Be prepared. When you make your initial appointment, ask whether you should bring a copy of any medical records, such as the results of your latest total blood cholesterol test. Some nutritionists ask clients to keep a food diary for a few days, noting everything they eat and drink, when they eat, and how full they feel. David Grotto, an R.D. and ADA spokesman in Chicago, says he prefers to see for himself how his clients eat. "I go through their kitchen cabinets and refrigerators," he says.

Nutritionists fold that information in with your medical history, height, weight, age, activity level, and body-fat percentage. The R.D.s we consulted said they then design a detailed diet plan based on your nutrition needs, goals, and preferences. Expect follow-up visits to check on your progress or to modify the diet plan.

*****NOTE: As a service to benefits-eligible UA employees, consultation with an RD is a free service through UA Life & Work Connections. To schedule an appointment, call 621-4601.**