



Behind the hype: **Getting good nutrition advice**

What's the issue?

There is a lot of dubious nutrition advice in the media, and on the internet. Also, some commercially available diets, such as detox diets, or diets that exclude whole food groups, are not based on sound nutrition principles. Food and nutrition misinformation can have harmful effects on the health, well-being, and economic status of consumers¹. It is important to know where to find credible information on nutrition and health, and to refer people who need nutritional support to a nutrition specialist who is a registered health professional.

Who can you trust?

Dietitians

Dietitian is a legally protected title. In New Zealand, a dietitian must, by law, be registered with the Dietitians Board and hold a current practising certificate. The Dietitians Board protects the health and safety of the New Zealand public under the Health Practitioners Competency Act (HPCA) 2003, by ensuring that every dietitian working in New Zealand is fit to practice and meets the standards of professionalism. In order to be registered, dietitians must have completed an undergraduate degree in human nutrition as well as a post graduate qualification in dietetics. Dietitians are required to take part in a continuing professional development programme each year to maintain competency.

Dietitians are qualified to translate scientific nutrition information into practical dietary advice and often work in hospitals and private practice settings. Medical nutrition therapy can be provided for a number of medical conditions such as diabetes, cancer, renal disease and heart disease. Dietitians can also work in a variety of other settings including food service, sports, education, research, media, the food industry and government. Dietitians work in partnership with individuals, whānau, communities and populations, in states of health and disease, to support optimal health and well-being. Dietitians also have a prescribing endorsement. This means that they can prescribe special foods, vitamins, minerals, and nutrition-related medicines. You can check if a dietitian is registered by going to the Dietitians Board website.

In a nutshell

- Food and nutrition misinformation can have harmful effects on the health, well-being, and economic status of consumers.
- The title dietitian is legally protected, dietitians must have degree and post graduate qualifications in nutrition and dietetics and must be registered with the Dietitians Board. Dietitians are qualified to give medical nutrition advice.
- To be a registered nutritionist requires a minimum of a science degree in nutrition at bachelor and/or post-graduate level, and at least three years of professional work experience.
- Be wary of those calling themselves clinical, holistic, or therapeutic nutritionists. Always check the qualifications and experience of any health professional providing nutrition advice, especially if it is to treat a medical condition and make sure they are educated to at least degree level.

Nutritionists

The term nutritionist is not a protected term, there is no specific qualification or statutory legislation that regulates the profession and, therefore, the title can be used freely by anyone. This could range from someone with a PHD in a specialty area of nutrition, to someone with no formal training at all.

Registered Nutritionists

The Nutrition Society of New Zealand sets criteria to achieve registration status. To be a registered nutritionist, a science degree must be completed in nutrition at bachelor and/or post-graduate level. In addition, many registered nutritionists have also completed a Masters degree. To be registered, a nutritionist must also have at least two to three years of professional work experience, and registered nutritionists are expected to take part in continuing professional development every three years to maintain a high level of competency. Registered nutritionists may work in a variety of settings ranging from government, private practice, community, public health, sports, research, education and the food industry. Registered nutritionists may provide practical support for lifestyle nutrition and disease management, such as eating for wellness, weight management, sports nutrition. You can check if a nutritionist is registered by going to the Nutrition Society of New Zealand website.

Clinical Nutritionists

A “registered clinical nutritionist” is unlikely to be as highly qualified as a dietitian or a registered nutritionist. This is because the Dietitians Board and the Nutrition Society of New Zealand both have a much higher academic bar to registration than the Clinical Nutrition Association. To become a registered clinical nutritionist requires a diploma in nutrition (NZQA level 6) and six months of work experience.

Nutrition consultants

In New Zealand, anyone can call themselves a “nutritionist”, a “clinical nutritionist”, a “therapeutic nutritionist” or a “holistic nutritionist” – all of which are not defined by

law, unlike titles such as “dietitian”, “doctor”, “nurse”, “midwife” or “dentist”.

Be wary of nutrition associations that are not credible. The English scientist and writer Dr Ben Goldacre once famously applied for a certificate from the American Association of Nutritional Consultants (AANC) for his dead cat Henrietta². “It looks as if all you need to be a certified member of the AANC is a name, an address, and a spare \$60. You don’t need to be human. You don’t even need to be alive,” said Ben.

Terms such as “clinical”, “holistic” and “therapeutic” – can be warning signs that the nutritionist doesn’t have a Bachelor of Science (BSc) or a Master of Science in Nutrition – the minimum anyone should expect if paying for advice. If medical nutrition therapy is needed, a registered dietitian should be consulted, as the wrong advice can have harmful outcomes.

In New Zealand, always ask if a health professional is registered with the New Zealand Dietitians Board or the Nutrition Society of New Zealand, and if not ask for evidence of their qualifications, experience and competency.

Referrals

Always refer anyone needing specialist nutrition or dietetic advice or support to a registered dietitian or registered nutritionist.

References

1. Wansink B; American Dietetic Association (2006). Position of the American Dietetic Association: food and nutrition misinformation. *J Am Diet Assoc.* Apr; 106(4): 601-7. (Website <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16639825>, Accessed July 2021).
2. Goldacre B (2004). Bad Science (<https://www.badsociety.net/index.php?s=henrietta+cat> Accessed July 2021)

Further information

Dietitians Board <https://www.dietitiansboard.org.nz/>

Dietitians New Zealand <https://dietitians.org.nz/public-info/>

Nutrition Society <http://www.nutritionssociety.ac.nz/registration>

How to check if a health professional is registered

Dietitians Board: <https://www.dietitiansboard.org.nz/search-register/>

Nutrition Society: Find a Nutritionist - Nutrition Society of New Zealand <https://www.nutritionssociety.ac.nz/find-a-nutritionist>

