

Nutrition History Interview Skills

DIETITIANS AND NUTRITIONISTS conduct numerous interviews with patients and clients. Learning to conduct an interview and to excel in the interview process is part of becoming a nutrition professional. To improve your nutrition history interview skills, practice asking open-ended questions.



Objective:



Summarize nutrition history questioning techniques.

Key Terms:



active listening

closed-ended question

dietitian

eating pattern

empathy

family history

interpersonal skills

interview

motivational interviewing

nutrition history

nutritionist

open-ended question

qualified nutritionist

rapport

Understanding Nutrition History Interview Skills

Both dietitians and qualified nutritionists conduct nutrition history interviews. A **dietitian** is a health professional with a university degree who is an expert in nutrition and/or dietetics. Dietitians provide advice to patients and others about improving their diet: therapeutic nutrition. The interviewer will ask the applicant to demonstrate an ability to deal with different situations encountered with patients.



FIGURE 1. A dietitian is a health professional with a university degree and an expert in nutrition and/or dietetics. Dietitians provide advice to patients and others about improving their diet: therapeutic nutrition.

In contrast, a **nutritionist** is a non-accredited title that applies to someone with class work or a short course in nutrition. A **qualified nutritionist** is a food scientist who has a university degree. To work with patients, the dietitian and the nutritionist must encourage the patient to expand on questions regarding family history, environment, etc.

NUTRITION HISTORY QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

When working with patients, several techniques may be useful to you.

Interviews

An **interview** is a formal meeting held between a specialist and a patient/client, typically conducted in a question-and-answer format. Proper preparation for an interview has a positive effect on the process outcome. Breaking the interview into sections and preparing properly for each section makes the process less frightening, especially for a first interview.

Finding a quiet place to complete a phone interview is critical. It is also important that the dietitian or nutritionist is not interrupted while on the phone.

Interpersonal skills are crucial to conducting an in-person interview. **Interpersonal skills** are those abilities that relate to a person's ability to work with others. Dietitians and nutritionists prepare for an in-person interview by reading a patient/client chart and the details of any physician notes. They also research the nutrition or diet issue: obesity, cardiac problems, high cholesterol, etc. and prepare open-ended questions. Most patient/client questions should be the open-ended variety to encourage discussion and for the sharing of information.

Open- and Closed-Ended Questions

An **open-ended question** is a query that begins with "who, what, when, where, why, or how." This type of question allows the respondent to provide a free-form answer. Proficiency using open-ended questions is critical when working in nutrition and dietetics occupations. Open-ended questioning is used to conduct patient and client interviews. During nutrition history interviews, avoid closed-ended questions.

A **closed-ended question** is a query easily answered by a "yes or no" reply or by just one word (e.g., How old are you? What is your age? What time is it?). For example, a multiple-choice question is closed-ended. While open-ended questions result in the



FIGURE 2. An open-ended question is a query that begins with "who, what, when, where, why, or how." It allows the respondent to provide a free-form answer. Proficiency using open-ended questions is critical when working in nutrition and dietetics occupations.

person answering the question with thought and providing more information, a closed-ended question generally results in little additional insight into the patient.

Closed-ended questions typically do not stimulate conversation and dialogue. Because open-ended questions often do not come naturally, when working in nutrition and dietetics settings, you may find it beneficial to be aware of the type of questions typically asked. Becoming more adept at including open-ended questions into daily conversation is a way to practice and be more conscious of what a person is saying and how it is being said.

Nutritional Interview Questions

When conducting a nutrition or dietetic interview, most questions to the patient/client will be open-ended and situational (case study-type) questions. Interviews using open-ended questions provide patient insights. For dietitians and nutritionists, the skillful use of open-ended questions is essential to successful patient interviews.

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions begin with words “who, what, when, where, or how.” Professionals are cautious in the use of “why” questions, especially when discussing diet. “Why” questions often put the client on the defensive or may feel judged by use of the question. For example, asking, “Why does your diet contain so much sugar?” has a different effect than asking, “What are some choices you could make that would reduce the amount of sugar in your diet?”

Using open-ended questions encourages patients/clients to:

- ◆ Talk more during the interview
- ◆ Reflect and discuss
- ◆ Provide information—social and environment

Closed-Ended Questions

Using closed-ended questions generally result in patients/clients producing:

- ◆ One-word answers (e.g., more “yes or no” responses)
- ◆ A counselor-led interview
- ◆ Little information beyond the “questions on the form”

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational interviewing is discussing through open-ended questions. The goal of motivational interviewing is to incite and inspire patients/clients to change their behavior. Helping people change their eating habits is a difficult task, and everyone reacts better and has better results when motivated. Open-ended questions are often used in motivational interviewing.

NUTRITION HISTORY ASSESSMENT

Nutrition History Process

A **nutrition history** is an assessment of a person's typical daily food intake. Successful dietitians and nutritionists must have a good relationship with the patient/client and then must be able to conduct a comprehensive (complete) nutrition history interview. The skill level of the interviewer is positively related to the success rate of patients/clients reaching their goals. While the professional's personality plays a part, most of the skills needed to complete a successful interview are those learned and improved with practice. The nutrition history interview is generally comprised of the following parts: introduction, medical history, family history, personal and social history, diet history, and goal setting.

Introduction

The introduction should be comfortable and professional. It is important to make the client feel comfortable. It is essential to have the client explain why he or she requested the meeting. The use of good communication skills demonstrates to the client that everyone is working toward the same goal.

Medical History

Medical history includes illnesses and diet issues—recent and in the past. The medical history is typically available in the patient/client chart. The purpose is for the interviewer to become familiar with the medical history and to ask questions that make it clear to the client that the dietitian/nutritionist is interested in the best outcome for the patient/client.

Family History

Family history is health information related to genetic and/or reoccurring issues due to environmental or social issues. Most family history questions are about immediate family members.

Personal and Social History

The personal and social history component is typically conducted in conversation, in an interview method, or through the use of a form. Done correctly, personal and social history provides insight into the lifestyle of the patient/client. Often personal and social issues are



FIGURE 3. Why is the patient interview so important? What can the dietitian do to help the client feel more comfortable? What role do communication skills and open-ended questions play in a patient interview?

related to the nutrition and dietary issues. Gathering more information from the client during this stage of the interview frequently comes from asking relevant open-ended questions that the client expands upon.

Dietary History

A dietary history provides a clearer picture of the patient's/client's eating patterns. An **eating pattern** is the totality of all foods and beverages consumed. All forms of food are included in the diet history eating pattern questions: fresh, canned, frozen, and dried. This important part of the interview often creates a starting point when establishing dietary goals and changes.

Plans and Goals

The dietitian and the patient/client work together to establish achievable diet goals. It is important that the patient/client feels the dietitian/nutritionist is a partner in the process versus a lecturer. Establishing a patient's/client's willingness to change an eating pattern or habit is important. A feeling of confidence about the process is essential to reaching the plan goals.

Dietitians/nutritionists use their counseling skills to make the patient/client feel comfortable and conduct the interview. Characteristics of a productive nutrition history interview include:

- ◆ Patients/clients must pay close attention to the reliability of their responses. Sometimes the whole truth is not disclosed, and the interviewer must continually be aware of that possibility.
- ◆ Cultural food issues can influence the nutrition history interview. The interview is a critical part of the dietitian's/nutritionist's job. But the interview situation will be different, and there is no one way to achieve the desired results. This is a part of the job that improves with practice.



UNDER INVESTIGATION...

LAB CONNECTION: Conducting a Patient Interview

Read "Taking a Nutrition History" at <http://www.aafp.org/afp/1999/0315/p1521.html>. Print the sample nutrition history form, and conduct a nutrition history assessment with family members or friends, as if they are your clients. Using the information you learned in this unit and in your courses, write a summary of the history you took.



The dietitian and the patient/client work together to establish achievable diet goals. A feeling of confidence about the process is critical to reaching the plan goals.

Successful Nutrition History Interviews

Communication skills are important when conducting patient interviews. Good communication skills come more naturally to some than others. However, these are learned skills that can be improved with practice. Verbal communication skills include listening skills, empathy, friendliness, open-ended questions, and interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills are the ability to interact with people; they are often referred to as “people skills.”

Listening

Listening is hearing that which is said, and **active listening** is hearing what is said while interpreting what is spoken and what is not spoken. Active listening is a key tool to develop when conducting patient/client interviews. However, it is often a skill that takes a lot of practice. Active listening requires the listener to focus his or her full attention on the speaker.

Empathy

Empathy is understanding and sharing emotions with another as a tool to build rapport and trust. **Rapport** is a close and harmonious relationship. Again, the use of open-ended questions means that the patient/client shares more information that makes finding solutions for change easier.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication skills include tone of voice, body language, silence, nodding, facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures. As an interviewer, it is important to be aware of a patient’s/client’s nonverbal communication.

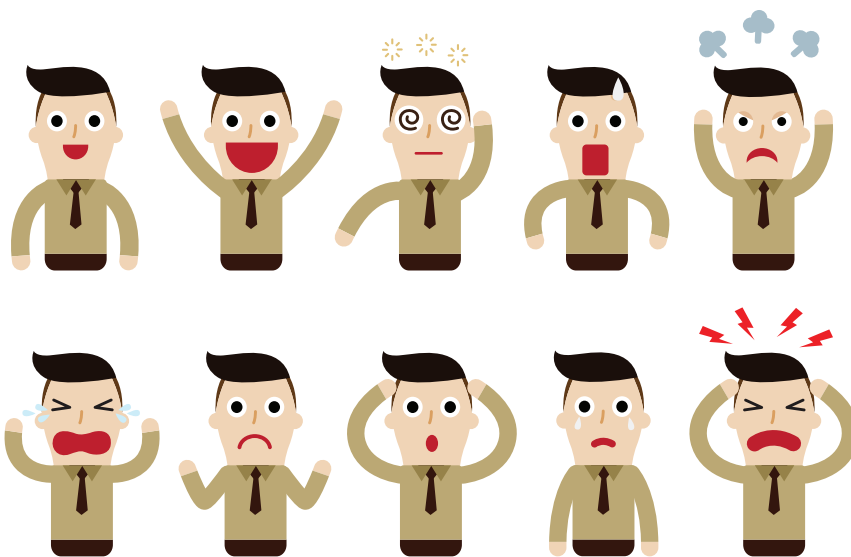


FIGURE 4. What message is being communicated in each of these facial expressions?

Summary:



Both dietitians and qualified nutritionists conduct nutrition history interviews. Dietitians provide advice to patients and others about improving their diet: therapeutic nutrition. To work with patients, the dietitian and the nutritionist must encourage the patient to expand on questions regarding family history, environment, etc.

A nutrition history is an assessment of a person’s typical daily food intake. Successful dietitians and nutritionists must have a good relationship with the patient/client and then must be able to conduct a comprehensive nutrition history interview. The

skill level of the interviewer is positively related to the success rate of patients/clients.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What is the difference between an open- and a closed-ended question?
2. What is the difference between a dietitian and a qualified nutritionist?
3. Describe a nutrition history assessment.
4. What are the parts of a nutrition history assessment?
5. Describe a patient interview.

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Watch the two-part YouTube video series Nutrition Assessment—Diet History Part 1 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76OfesBw0> and Part 2 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6F0Y2URntvk>. Summarize the information in the two-part series.

Web Links:



Dietitians and Nutritionists

<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dietitians-and-nutritionists.htm>

Learn to Ask Better Questions

<https://hbr.org/2010/02/learn-to-ask-better-questions>

Nutrition Counseling Client Forms

<http://www.fgnutrition.com/forms.htm>