

fitness nutrition training WARNING: THE WRONG NUTRITIONIST CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH: HOW TO RECOGNIZE A QUACK

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The New York Times April 17, 1988, Sunday, SECTION: Section 6; Part 2, Page 36, Column 1; The Good Health Magazine HEADLINE: WARNING: THE WRONG NUTRITIONIST CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH BYLINE: By Jane E. Brody; Jane E. Brody is the personal health columnist and a science writer for The New York Times. BODY: SASSAFRAS HERBERT'S WALL sports a handsome certificate, complete with gold seal and red ribbon, declaring her to be a "professional member" of the American Association of Nutrition and Dietary Consultants, which calls itself "a professional association dedicated to maintaining ethical standards in nutritional and dietary consulting." Having met all the requirements for membership, Ms. Herbert can be listed in a national directory that the association describes as "a Who's Who in the world of modern nutrition." It's hard to know what Ms. Herbert thinks of her accomplishments, because she can neither talk nor read. She has never even been to school, at least not the kind with desks and blackboards. For Ms. Herbert is a dog, a poodle whose impressive certificate arrived in the mail after her owner, Dr. Victor Herbert, a lawyer and a physician at the Bronx Veterans Administration Medical Center in New York, sent the aforementioned association a check for \$50. Dr. Herbert had no plans to market his dog's nutritional expertise, but he did want to demonstrate the rampant quackery that prevails in the field of nutrition counseling. Another pet owner got a mail-order degree for his hamster. The point is that nearly anyone can call himself a nutritionist and "prove it" with official-looking diplomas and certificates and a string of impressive initials after his name. In most cases, the credentials are awarded by unaccredited colleges and universities that require only that a student pay the tuition, read some books and pass a take-home test. These mail-order degrees can generally be earned in only a few months. Such deception goes virtually unchallenged because most states neither license nutritionists nor have any laws that say who is qualified to practice as one. Although nutritional quackery has existed for more than a century, until recently relatively few people paid much attention to it. Over the past decade, however, various personal and societal concerns - including a desire for optimum health and fitness, uncertainty about the safety and adequacy of the modern diet and a justifiable distrust of the nutritional competence of most physicians - have joined to create a mass market for advice on nutrition. The American Dietetic Association, which represents 57,000 professional nutritionists, reports that there has been a "dramatic increase" in the number of "unqualified nutritionists who dupe the public with gimmicks and quackery." Two graduates of unaccredited correspondence schools, "Dr." Robert Haas and Harvey Diamond, are best-selling "nutritionist" authors. They offer a mixture of truth and poetry that has won converts even among the intellectually sophisticated. Haas, author of "Eat to Win," was awarded his Ph.D. by Columbia Pacific University in San Rafael, Calif., where, according to material sent to applicants, many students earn their degrees in one year or less. Although most of Haas's advice is sound, there is no scientific evidence to substantiate his claims that certain nutrients and supplements, such as ginseng and phenylalanine, help athletes achieve "peak performance." Diamond, author of "Fit for Life," is a graduate of the American College of Health Science in Austin, Tex., which recently changed its name to the Life Sciences Institute and stopped awarding degrees because the state said it was not qualified to operate as a college. According to the registered dietitians who edit the newsletter Environmental Nutrition, Diamond's book is filled with inaccuracies. For example, contrary to his assertions, steak and potatoes, when eaten together, do not rot in the digestive tract; foods that are not absorbed by the body do not make you fat; digestion does not use more calories than running; fruits and vegetables can't supply all the nutrients you need, and fruit is not a good source of calcium. Even a legitimate degree, such as an M.D., doesn't guarantee that someone who practices as a nutritionist offers scientifically accurate advice. A case in point is Dr. Robert Atkins, a physician whose best-selling "Diet Revolution" espouses meals rich in animal fats and cholesterol and almost devoid of carbohydrates. Some nutrition advisers don't even bother flaunting degrees and credentials. Many work in health food stores, pharmacies, health clubs and other places frequented by the fitness-minded. Or they're your friends and neighbors who work for one of the many national distributors of health foods and dietary supplements, selling nutrition door-to-door the way the Avon lady sells cosmetics and the Fuller Brush man sells brooms. Nutritional quackery would not be a problem if all the advice were cheap and safe. Too often, it is neither, and in rare instances it can be life-threatening. Some cancer and heart disease patients abandon established treatments in favor of fringe diets that are erroneously touted as cures. Many people endanger rather than enhance their health by adhering to unbalanced weight-loss schemes, by relying on therapies that are supposed to "cleanse" the body of poisons but merely wash out essential nutrients or by swallowing fistfuls of vitamins and minerals that may distort the body's nutritional balance or cause druglike side effects. FORTUNATELY, DESPITE THE LEGIONS of quacks, there are many well-trained nutritionists who offer excellent, personalized counseling. Perhaps you have failed in your attempts to lose weight and keep it off and are now ready to accept outside help. Or you may have a disease, or fear developing one, that necessitates a dietary change to maximize your chances for getting, or staying, well. The doctor has given you a printed sheet of dietary advice that seems to defy implementation. What, you may ask, is there left to eat, and how can I follow this regimen when I eat out every day or travel all week? A good nutrition counselor should be able to help you analyze your diet to determine whether it is properly balanced and whether it increases your chances of developing any health problems. Perhaps you've been diagnosed as having a digestive disorder or another diet-related problem, such as heart disease, weight control (loss or gain), high blood cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure, hiatus hernia, or ulcers. A nutrition counselor can help you restructure your eating and exercise habits to keep these conditions under control. Or maybe you're perfectly healthy and want to stay that way. A nutrition counselor can guide you to an eating and exercise plan that minimizes your risk of developing heart disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure or even hemorrhoids. A nutritionist can also address individual problems, such as

food allergies or aversions to certain foods that make it difficult to eat a well-balanced diet. After determining why you are seeking advice, a professional counselor should ask some basic questions: What and how much do you eat? What are your favorite methods of preparing food? What foods do you like and dislike? How often do you exercise? When do you eat? Where do you eat, and with whom? Who generally does the shopping and cooking in your household? Some counselors may even ask who puts away the leftovers, since that person is most likely to eat them.

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHETHER a nutritionist uses a computer or a pencil and paper to analyze the information you provide. In fact, some computer programs are specifically designed to recommend dietary supplements sold by the nutritionist. Although a good program can simplify a nutritionist's job, it is not critical to an assessment of your needs. What is critical is that you supply accurate information about your diet and exercise habits. Most people are notoriously poor at recalling what they ate yesterday, let alone during the entire previous week. To get around this problem, the nutritionist may suggest that you keep a detailed diary of every food you eat for a week or two. He may also ask you to list your daily activities, in order to determine the amount and quality of the exercise you get. This is no time to cheat by recording just those items that will impress the counselor. Only honesty will result in the beneficial guidance you seek.

If you haven't had a physical examination in a few years, a nutrition counselor may suggest that you see a doctor for blood and urine tests. (A nutritionist with an M.D. degree generally performs these tests himself.) Blood and urine tests can reveal actual or potential medical problems that are affected by diet, such as too much cholesterol in your blood (a risk factor for heart disease), too little hemoglobin (iron-deficiency anemia) or too much sugar in your urine (diabetes).

After establishing your dietary needs, a nutritionist may give you a trial diet and, in some cases, an exercise program to follow for a week or two. At a follow-up visit the nutritionist will most likely assess how the plan is working and make any needed revisions. A good nutritionist will also invite you to call about any problems and questions that may arise in the interim. Unlike most physicians, nutritionists can provide detailed assistance in how to shop for wholesome foods, read food labels, prepare fast and healthful meals, eat well while traveling, cope with different food needs in the family, and motivate yourself to start and stick with an exercise program.

DON'T EXPECT TO revolutionize your eating habits and sense of well-being overnight. Changes that you can maintain are best made gradually. Unless you're eliminating a food that you are allergic to, you probably will not experience immediate, dramatic benefits by changing your eating habits. And unless your symptoms are caused by a particular nutrient deficiency, you should not expect to be cured simply through dietary modifications. Rather, after several weeks or months on your new regimen, you should begin to see improvements in how you look and feel. Keep in mind that changes in nutrition cannot remedy every health problem and that sound weight-reduction diets do not have you dropping five pounds in five days. Panaceas and quick fixes are for quacks. In addition, professional advice may change as new research is completed. The experts freely admit that nutrition is a growing science and does not have all of the answers.

A GOOD NUTRITIONIST ANSWERS THESE QUESTIONS * Does your vegetarian diet provide enough protein? * Are you getting enough calcium to help prevent osteoporosis? * Is your intake of iron, B vitamins and zinc adequate? * Do you eat too much fat or too little fiber? * Is your sweet tooth likely to ruin your figure? * Are you eating properly to support a healthy pregnancy?

FINDING A QUALIFIED NUTRITIONIST ONLY 13 STATES LICENSE OR certify nutritionists, thereby insuring that they are scientifically trained. But in the other states - including New York, New Jersey and Connecticut - anybody can legally claim to be a nutritionist, and consumers must be careful. The best way to find a qualified nutritionist is to get a list of referrals from your doctor, a local hospital or a professional organization such as the American Dietetic Association or the American Society for Clinical Nutrition. The majority of legitimate nutritionists are registered dietitians (R.D.s), a title that denotes certification by the American Dietetic Association. An R.D. candidate is required to have an undergraduate degree in any subject, whether it is related to nutrition or not, and to have taken courses in nutrition, food science or an allied field. For certification, the candidate must complete an internship in nutrition counseling or food service management by working with a registered dietitian, pass a national exam administered by the American Dietetic Association and take 75 hours of courses or professional seminars every five years to keep up with new research in nutrition science. There are approximately 47,000 registered dietitians in this country. In addition, several hundred nutritionists are either medical doctors with post-graduate training in nutrition or clinicians with Ph.D.s in the subject. These people are likely to be members of the American Society of Clinical Nutrition and certified by the American Board of Nutrition. A nutritionist's services generally cost about \$30 to \$100 an hour. Some health insurance policies may cover the fee if the nutritionist is a physician, or if nutrition counseling was prescribed by a physician. At least two weekly or bimonthly visits are necessary for proper nutrition counseling, but few people need more than six.

For a list of registered dietitians in your city, contact your local chapter of the American Dietetic Association; in New York City, call the Greater New York Dietetic Association (212-549-1170) and ask for Barbara Muhlfelder. To get a list of board-certified nutritionists with M.D.s or Ph.D.s in your state, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the American Board of Nutrition, 6212 Old Keene Mill Court, Springfield, Va. 22152. - J.E.B.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A QUACK Like the snake-oil purveyors of old, today's nutritional quacks speak in certainties and make unequivocal promises without regard to scientific evidence. They may assert, for example, that a particular diet will cure cancer or prevent heart disease, whereas scientists can only say for sure that certain foods may diminish the risks of getting these illnesses. Here are some other earmarks of nutritional quackery. * The practitioner insists that

most doctors, the Food and Drug Administration and professional organizations such as the American Medical Association don't know what they're talking about with regard to your health. He may even claim to be persecuted by the medical establishment. * The practitioner has no training in nutrition or food science but may display a string of spurious credentials. According to Dr. Stephen Barrett, a leader in exposing health frauds and editor of the newsletter Nutrition Forum, questionable credentials include a degree in nutrition counseling from an unaccredited correspondence school such as the American College of Health Science in Texas, Columbia Pacific University in California or Donsbach University in California. Dr. Barrett also recommends avoiding nutrition advisers who belong to the

American Association of Nutritional Consultants or the American Nutraceutical Association, organizations that do not require their members to have degrees from accredited institutions. * His nutrition education is not based on scientifically established facts. He may have a degree such as Doctor of Naturopathy (N.D.), Certified Herbologist (C.H.), Doctor of Chiropractic (D.C.), Registered Healthologist (R.H.) or Certified Acupuncturist (C.A.). * The counselor claims that modern methods of processing, storing and shipping foods strip them of key nutrients and that people can't possibly get a balanced diet without vitamin and mineral supplements. * He uses unproved diagnostic methods and treatments, such as hair analysis. * He espouses "superfoods" and "supernutrients" and may even sell the remedies he prescribes. * He recommends similar foods and supplements for all clients.

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