

# How to talk with your patients about nutrition

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Patients are often unaware that the best form of defense against death and disability is proper nutrition and diet, which begins in the kitchen. And while patients might eagerly search for nutrition advice to control their symptoms and conditions, they often can't sort through the different recommendations found online. Physicians can improve the conversation by strengthening their knowledge of clinical nutrition and through motivational interviewing.

By completing the three-hour, self-paced online nutrition course from suburban Chicago-based nonprofit Gaples Institute for Integrative Cardiology, physicians can learn how to talk to their patients about nutrition—even under the constraints of a busy office.

“Increasingly, patients are asking their doctors about what they should do with their diet but, most physicians just haven’t had enough training to address those questions,” Stephen Devries, MD, a cardiologist and executive director of the Gaples Institute, told *AMA Wire*®. “Physicians increasingly want to use nutritional interventions in their practice, but there are very few resources available for them to learn about nutrition—which is why we developed this 3 hour, self-paced interactive course.”

The last section of the course includes patient scenarios that demonstrate how physicians can effectively respond to common nutrition questions and enhance patient engagement through motivational interviewing. The course concludes with a section on physician self-care.

## Let patients carry the conversation

Patients often have mixed feelings about making dietary changes and may turn off if they feel their concerns aren't being addressed. To encourage lifestyle changes, consider motivational interviewing, an alternative to persuasion.

“Many patients have several dietary issues that could be improved,” said Dr. Devries. “Rather than trying to tackle all at once, a useful strategy is to engage the patient to identify which dietary opportunity they are ready-and willing-to work on. “

When physicians use motivational interviewing, it encourages patients to think and speak in a positive way about change. Physicians can begin by asking the patient about their interest in changing their diet, followed by active listening. The physician can help guide them in identifying how to make changes based on their own life experience and goals.

## Practice what you preach

Health care professionals who adopt healthy lifestyles are more prone to counsel their patients about nutrition and physical activity, as described in the last section of the online nutrition course. Patients will often care more about their diet if they know their physician believes it is a top priority too.

“We know that clinicians who adopt healthier lifestyle practices themselves are more likely to counsel their patients about healthy practices,” said Dr. Devries.

By prioritizing nutrition, physicians not only improve their own health, but are also more likely to improve their patients’ health too. However, physicians don’t have to take on nutrition by themselves. There are many different professionals that can help with nutritional interventions, especially dietitians as well as properly trained nutritionists, nurses, health coaches, and chefs.

“Nutrition and diet are definitely a team effort in patient care and there is no way that physicians can or should take on all of the dietary needs of patients,” he said. “Certainly more complex situations and meal planning are best addressed by fulltime experts in nutrition, but still, physicians need to have enough training to at least begin the nutrition conversation with their patients and make empowered referrals.”

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