

Where do personal trainers obtain nutrition knowledge from, how frequently this is requested, and what nutrition recommendations, if any, they feel comfortable and qualified to provide?

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Background to research design

Physical activity and consuming a healthy, balanced diet have been identified as positively interrelated activities which reduce the risk of developing chronic conditions, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Fleig, et al., 2015). The prevalence of such non-communicable diseases is increasing globally, and the promotion of healthy behaviours can play a key role in education and prevention (World Health Organisation, 2023). Personal trainers have been identified as being well placed to promote adoption of the aforementioned preventative behaviours (McKean, et al., 2015), with Oprescu, et al., (2012) suggesting that fitness professionals could play a central role in the prevention of obesity and related comorbidities.

Personal trainers are often expected by clients to possess knowledge in the field of nutrition, in particular healthy eating principles, nutrition for the promotion of increased muscle mass and weight loss and supplementation. Fitness professionals are qualified to provide exercise advice, but their nutritional credentials can vary depending on training undertaken (Barnes, et al., 2016). Given the role that personal trainers play in health promotion, and the expectation of nutrition advice from their clients, the aim of this research project was to investigate where personal trainers obtain nutrition knowledge from, how frequently this is requested, and what nutrition recommendations, if any, they feel comfortable and qualified to provide.

Method

Data was collected through semi-structured face to face interviews with personal trainers and thematically analysed. Face to face interviews were chosen for ease, and also due to helping to establish rapport between the researcher and participants (Draper & Swift, 2010). Personal trainers aged 18 and over in the gym the researcher attended were approached and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study.

Seven questions were formulated using the NUTrition COMPeTence (NUTCOMP) (Ball & Leveritt, 2015) questionnaire and previous research carried out by Barnes et al., (2016).

Results

Of six personal trainers who were approached, three participated in the study. In terms of how important nutrition was for their own training, all three participants said that their approach to nutrition was dependant on what specific training goals were at any time. When asked about sources of nutrition information, all three participants mentioned anecdotal research based on what has worked for them, as well as Instagram, with two participants stating that Instagram posts had prompted them to carry out further research on the topic. One participant had independently undertaken a year long nutrition diploma and offered nutrition services alongside their role as a personal trainer. All three participants stated that nutrition advice was something they were commonly asked for, specifically meal plans, and that this was something that was expected as part of the personal training package. One participant commented that

“they assume it is part of the process from the offset”.

When asked about client expectations one participant stated that this was

“more than I am probably qualified to give”.

Confidence varied depending on the complexity of the request, with participants stating that they knew what worked for them, and when discussing macronutrients and energy, would give clients a

“benchmark goal to work within...more of a range”

Another stated they would feel

“fairly confident as long as they are general population and no health concerns”.

Gathering medical information and allergies was mentioned by one participant, and two participants specifically stated that they would signpost clients to a qualified nutrition professional if a client requested in depth and personalised nutrition advice.

Discussion and Conclusion

In line with previous research carried out by Barnes, et al., (2016), this study demonstrated that there is an client expectation on personal trainers to provide a nutrition advice, which is obtained from a mix of personal experience, social media and formal qualifications.

Awareness of allergies and health conditions was mentioned by one participant, and two participants mentioned onward referral to a nutrition professional, whilst the third participant held a nutrition qualification themselves. Barnes, et al., (2019) comment that gathering a full medical history, and details of any nutritional deficiencies, allergies, or intolerances can help to ensure client safety, and that personal trainers are working within their scope of practice. Practising outside of this could pose a health risk to clients (Weissman & Magnus, 2011).

All three participants felt confident to provide general healthy eating advice. No participants made reference to the Eatwell Guide (PHE, 2016), which sets out the recommended balance of food groups to form a healthy diet in the UK. The International Confederation of Registers for Exercise Professionals (2024) advocate that any nutrition advice provided by personal trainers is in line with national nutrition guidelines.

It is acknowledged that the sample size of participants was smaller than anticipated. Further research covering a larger participant group is required to improve external validity of the research findings (Denscombe, 2014).

To conclude, increased understanding of levels and sources of nutrition knowledge amongst personal trainers can aid in the provision of future education provided to personal trainers and ensure information shared with clients is appropriate, optimising both safety and efficacy of nutrition advice.

A full reference list can be found on the next slide

References

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