



Year VI, v.1 2026 | Submission: 01/17/2026 | Accepted: 01/19/2026 | Publication: 01/21/2026

## Health Education and Training of Primary Care Nutritionists in the Prevention of Eating Disorders: An Integrative Review

*Health Education And Training Of Primary Health Care Nutritionists In The Prevention Of Eating Disorders: An Integrative Review*

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### Summary

**Introduction:** Eating disorders (EDs) are a growing public health concern, affecting individuals of all ages who are treated in Primary Health Care (PHC). These disorders manifest through changes in eating habits, body image, and food-related behaviors, requiring an approach that considers nutritional, psychological, and clinical aspects in an integrated way. In this context, the nutritionist plays an essential role in prevention, early identification, and health guidance, encouraging healthy eating practices and promoting more humanized care.

However, significant gaps still exist in the training and continuing education of these professionals, hindering the initial identification of signs and the necessary interdisciplinary approach for the treatment of eating disorders. **Objective:** To analyze how health education and training of nutritionists in Primary Care can contribute to the prevention of eating disorders in Primary Health Care. **Methodology:** This is an integrative literature review. Articles published between 2021 and 2025 that addressed the performance, training, or education of nutritionists related to the prevention or management of eating disorders, mainly in the context of Primary Health Care or in multidisciplinary settings, were included. The search for studies was conducted in the SciELO, PubMed, Research, Society and Development (RSD Journal), and MDPI (Nutrients Journal) databases, complemented by a manual search of cross-references. **Results and Discussion:** The reviewed research indicates that, despite the crucial role of nutritionists in the prevention and treatment of eating disorders in Primary Health Care, significant gaps persist in their academic training, continuing education, and emotional preparedness. A lack of specific clinical guidelines, professional insecurity, low multidisciplinary integration, and a scarcity of structured continuing education programs were observed.

Additionally, the literature shows that eating disorders are under-discussed in national and international studies focused on primary health care, which restricts the advancement of effective strategies for professional training and interventions in public services. The results highlight the urgency of expanding discussions on eating habits, mental health, and therapeutic communication in the training of nutritionists, as well as the importance of strengthening support networks and clinical supervision. **Conclusion:** The review showed that health education and continuous professional development are fundamental to improving the nutritionist's performance in addressing eating disorders in primary health care. Challenges persist related to a lack of technical and emotional preparedness, low interdisciplinary collaboration, and the absence of specific guidelines, factors that compromise the quality of care. Professional training and research evaluating the impact of continuing education are essential to promote a more qualified, humanized, and effective nutritional practice in addressing eating disorders.

**Keywords:** primary health care; health education; professional training; nutritionist; eating disorders.

### Abstract

Introduction: Eating disorders (EDs) are a growing public health concern, affecting individuals of all ages who are treated in Primary Health Care (PHC). These disorders manifest through changes in

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eating habits, body image, and food-related behaviors, requiring an approach that considers nutritional, psychological, and clinical aspects in an integrated way. In this scenario, nutritionists play an essential role in prevention, early identification, and health guidance, encouraging healthy eating practices and promoting more humanized care. However, significant gaps still exist in the training and updating of these professionals, which hinders the initial identification of signs and the necessary interdisciplinary approach for the treatment of EDs. Objective: To analyze how health education and the training of nutritionists in Primary Care can contribute to the prevention of eating disorders in Primary Health Care. Methodology: This is an integrative literature review. Articles published between 2021 and 2025 that addressed the performance, training, or education of nutritionists related to the prevention or management of eating disorders, mainly in the context of Primary Health Care or in multidisciplinary settings, were included. The search for studies was conducted in the SciELO, PubMed, Research, Society and Development (RSD Journal), and MDPI (Nutrients Journal) databases, supplemented by a manual search of cross-references. Results and Discussion: The reviewed research indicates that, despite the crucial role of nutritionists in the prevention and treatment of eating disorders in Primary Health Care, significant gaps persist in their academic training, continuing education, and emotional preparedness. A lack of specific clinical guidelines, professional insecurity, low multidisciplinary integration, and a scarcity of structured continuing education programs were observed. Additionally, the literature shows that eating disorders are under-discussed in national and international studies focused on Primary Health Care, which restricts the advancement of effective strategies for professional training and interventions in public services. The results highlight the urgency of expanding discussions on eating habits, mental health, and therapeutic communication in the training of nutritionists, as well as the importance of strengthening support networks and clinical supervision. Conclusion: The review highlighted that health education and continuous professional development are fundamental to improving the nutritionist's performance in addressing eating disorders in primary health care. Challenges persist related to a lack of technical and emotional preparedness, low interdisciplinary collaboration, and the absence of specific guidelines, factors that compromise the quality of care. Professional training and research evaluating the impact of continuing education are essential to promote a more qualified, humanized, and effective nutritional practice in addressing eating disorders.

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## INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders have emerged as a public health problem.

on the rise, affecting not only teenagers and young people, but also adults and adult groups of middle-aged (31–50 years) patients seen in Primary Health Care (PHC) services (Samaniego-Vaesken, S. *et al.*, 2024). These disorders manifest themselves through changes in habits.

dietary and body image issues, requiring interventions from multidisciplinary teams that

combine clinical, psychological, and nutritional knowledge (Pereira, 2022). Within this scenario,

The nutritionist plays a crucial role in both the prevention and treatment of these conditions.

disorders, especially through health education and the promotion of healthy eating practices.

healthy (Santos, 2022).

The literature indicates that, even with the importance of the nutritionist in primary health care, there are still... deficiencies in the training and continuous professional development of these professionals to address issues complex conditions such as eating disorders (Setnick, J. *et al.* 2022). Research conducted by



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Santos (2022) in 27 Basic Health Units in the city of São Paulo, adopted a model

Observational and descriptive study to investigate the role of nutritionists in the daily routine of Primary Care.

examining both their personal interventions and their group initiatives, based on this study

Difficulties were encountered in applying integrated and preventive educational practices related to

to mental health and eating habits. Complementing this perspective, Pereira (2022)

He mentioned in his literature review that his main focus was to gather and analyze productions and

Professional practices in the prevention of eating disorders have shown that nutritionists play a role.

fundamental in early identification, guidance on nutrition and nutritional education,

although it requires specific training to work in an interdisciplinary and humanized way.

with regard to eating disorders.

The importance of education and professional development for nutritionists is highlighted in global research. Heafala, Mitchell, and Ball (2022), in a qualitative analysis conducted in Australia,

They observed that nutritionists who treat eating disorders mention the need

Continuous support, supervision, and training to address the complexity of cases, emphasizing the

The importance of continuous training as a vital component for ethical and efficient practice.

Similarly, Setnick *et al.* (2022) show that a lack of technical preparation is recognized in scenarios.

Internationally, in a survey of 182 licensed dietitians in the United States, the results...

This study indicates that a large proportion of professionals did not have formal training on disorders.

The authors studied food during their undergraduate studies, acquiring knowledge through self-study.

They highlight the urgent need for organized clinical training and supervision programs for

To improve nutritional care and strengthen professional practice.

Similarly, Robertson and Davies (2024), in a qualitative investigation carried out

In the United Kingdom, studies have shown that the therapeutic relationship between nutritionists and individuals facing [difficulties] is [affecting/negative].

Eating disorders are fundamental to recovery, and are strengthened by skills of

Communication and empathy are skills that need to be cultivated from early education and improved.

through continuing education.

Furthermore, the research by Samaniego-Vaesken *et al.* (2024), conducted in Spain, increased

Understanding the epidemiological profile of eating disorders, highlighting their

A significant occurrence in middle-aged adults. This result highlights the crucial role of attention.

Primary as a strategic location for educational and preventative initiatives carried out by

Nutritionists trained to identify and act early in these cases.

Eating disorders are identified as a growing public health issue.

significantly affecting people's physical, mental, and social health. A systematic analysis

and meta-analysis performed by Silén *et al.* (2022) literature review focusing on global prevalence

of eating disorders (according to DSM-5 criteria) among adolescents and young adults.



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He highlighted that the lifetime prevalence rate of eating disorders varies according to the type. of disorders and sex, showing the scope and seriousness of these conditions in the global population. Specifically, it was found that anorexia nervosa has a prevalence between 0.8% and 6.3% in In women, the prevalence is between 0.1% and 0.3%, and in men; bulimia nervosa has a prevalence of 0.8% to 2.6% in women and 0.1% to 0.2% in men; and binge eating disorder ranges from 0.6% 6.1% in women and 0.3% to 0.7% in men (Silén *et al.*, 2022). These numbers highlight the The importance of eating disorders and the urgency of developing effective prevention strategies. and treatment within the scope of public health.

In this context, the research entitled "Prevalence and management of individuals with Eating disorders treated in primary care: A national study", conducted by Ivancic *et al.* (2021) in Australia, highlights the relevance of Primary Care as a crucial point for the Early identification and treatment of eating disorders. This is an observational study of a population-based study that examined more than 1.5 million consultations provided by physicians in family, revealing that less than 1% of consultations were linked to these disorders. The authors They point out that many cases go unnoticed at the initial level of care, representing an opportunity was missed for proper diagnosis and referrals. Furthermore, they were... Low referral rates to nutritionists and mental health specialists were identified. which highlights the shortcomings in the integration between clinical and nutritional care.

Therefore, it is clear that health education and continuous professional development are fundamental to improving the nutritionist's performance in Primary Health Care with regard to related to eating disorders. Lack of specific training, insufficient resources, and scarcity Collaboration between disciplines remains an obstacle to the effectiveness of these initiatives. Given this... In reality, it is essential to summarize and examine what the most recent literature reveals about how these... Educational and training methods can strengthen the role of the nutritionist in prevention and treatment. Combating eating disorders in the context of Primary Care is the main focus of this review. integrative.

## METHODOLOGY

This work consists of an integrative literature review, of a descriptive nature. exploratory. Which aims to answer the following guiding question: In what way... Health education and training for nutritionists in primary care can help in prevention. and in addressing eating disorders in Primary Health Care (PHC)?

The literature search was conducted in the SciELO, PubMed, Research, and Society databases. and Development (RSD Journal) and MDPI (Nutrients Journal) and SAGE Publications were used.



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descriptors combined by Boolean operators, namely: “nutritionist” Or “dietitian” AND

"Eating disorders" or "Eating behavior disorders" and "Health education"

Or “professional training” and “basic care” or “primary health care”. The following were used English terms for this research.

Primary studies published between 2021 and 2025 and available in Portuguese were included. English or Spanish, addressing the role, training, or education of nutritionists in prevention. or management of eating disorders, especially in the context of Primary Health Care. Duplicate studies, monographs, literature reviews, editorials, and opinions were excluded . dissertations, event abstracts, that did not show a relationship with the professional practice of nutritionist or someone involved in health education and eating disorders.

Data collection was carried out in sequential stages. Initially, a search was conducted for Studies were conducted in the selected databases using the defined descriptors. Following this, the results were read. Titles and abstracts were used to select articles that met the inclusion criteria. After this screening, The texts were read in their entirety, allowing for the identification of the main evidence regarding the The importance of health education and professional training for nutritionists in primary health care. Management and prevention of eating disorders.

Given the lack of detailed research on the role of nutritionists in prevention and in In the treatment of eating disorders, the scope of the investigation was expanded to include studies that they approach other health professionals who work with individuals affected by these conditions, provided they included aspects related to health education and professional training. or interdisciplinary collaboration. Articles that examined both patients were also included. with eating disorders regarding professional practices related to their treatment, with the The goal was to promote a more complete understanding of the subject. In addition, the following were taken into account... taking into account studies that addressed the role of nutritionists in Primary Health Care, even when that action was not directly related to the prevention, identification, or treatment of eating disorders, provided they contributed to reflection on training, skills development, and education. in the health of these professionals.

Figure 1 - Flowchart of the selection of articles chosen for the current research.



Source: developed by the authors, 2025.

Table 1, described below, compiles the most significant results for each...

The scientific article selected in the research, as well as the authors, type of study, year of publication, and location.

The study includes the sample, objectives, methodology, and results. The 6 articles are primary studies.

published in national and international journals, conducted in Brazil, Australia, Spain,

United States, United Kingdom. Of the selected articles, two were published in Portuguese, three

one in English and one in Spanish, reflecting the linguistic and geographical diversity of the productions.

Scientific studies on the role of nutritionists in the prevention and management of eating disorders.

**Table 1.** Summary of articles analyzed for review.

Articles	Author, year of Design, N study location	type of publication, study and	Study objectives of	Methodology	Key findings





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1	Sandri El. <i>et al.</i>  2024  Spain	Observational, cross-sectional, and descriptive study.  N = 9,913 Spanish adults (men and women, 31–50 years old)	The study sought to characterize and compare profiles of adults with and without problems in food, relating aspects nutritional, demographic and behavioral to better understand the context of these disorders, the middle-aged Spanish population in of	The survey revealed that nationally, 9,913 adults with AN and BN are present, representing about 3% of Spaniards. The survey also showed that middle-aged Spanish adults used an online questionnaire to collect data on dietary quality, including data on the greatest concern regarding body composition, diet, and physical activity.  and smaller  and lifestyle, it points to the importance of analyzing preventive strategies and means of multi-professional statistical intervention (with descriptive and inferential participation for nutritionists) to identify this age group.  Associations between variables.	
2	Santos, LF  2022  São Paulo	Comparative, observational study  N= 27 services	Compare the organization of Attention Nutritional care with/without a nutritionist in primary health care services.	Service evaluation with and without nutritionists; comparative analysis	The presence of a nutritionist improves partnerships with education, scheduling based on vulnerability, therapeutic projects, group monitoring, and the planning and evaluation of collective actions.
3	Heafala N. <i>et al.</i>  2022  Australia	Qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study.  N= 24	Exploring perspectives and lived experiences of People with eating disorders and their caregivers regarding the care provided by dietitians (nutritionists) in primary health care in Australia. in	Original field research with collection and analysis of primary data. with semi-structured interviews analysis and theme.	Person-centered care and the therapeutic alliance are seen as more important than isolated technical content. Bonding and active listening are crucial for the success of nutritional treatment for eating disorders.  Professionals need to understand the context. The emotional and social well-being of the patient is crucial. There is a need for training and support for nutritionists to develop empathetic communication skills and interdisciplinary work. The study indicates that, in many cases, current practices still lack this sensitivity, which reduces the effectiveness of care.
4	Setnick N. <i>et al.</i>  2022  States United States	Observational, descriptive, and cross-sectional.  N=182	Investigate the performance, training, and professional perceptions registered nutritionists (RDNs) that work with	Survey: put electronic questionnaire, quantitative study that collected information from nutritionists. (RDNs) about	The study revealed that most nutritionists working with eating disorders lack formal training and structured supervision, yet still play a role.  but

			disorders Eating Disorders in the United States.	your professional practice in the care of Eating disorders. The questionnaire assessed training, experience, work environments, and perceptions about the role of the nutritionist at different levels of care.	Crucial in assessment, nutritional re- education, and psychosocial support.  There is an urgent need for standardized training, recognition, and institutionalization of the work of these professionals.
5	Robertson N. <i>et al.</i>  2024  United Kingdom	Descriptive qualitative study using semi-structured interviews.  N=17	The study sought to understand the relationship between the nutritionist and the  patient influence therapeutic process, emotional nutritional recovery and engagement in treatment.	Performed in United Kingdom, 6 with nutritionists and patients. 11 The study used focus group interviews, analyzed through reflective thematic analysis, to understand how the therapeutic relationship between the nutritionist and patient is constructed during treatment of eating disorders	The study concludes that nutritionists play a key role in the care of eating disorders, and that their ability to build an empathetic and collaborative therapeutic relationship is crucial for successful treatment.  The importance of specific training in communication, eating behavior, in and mental health in dietary practice is reinforced.
6	Ivancic L. <i>et al.</i>  2021  Australia	Observational, cross- sectional.  N = 1,000 doctors / 1,568,100 consultations (1.3 million patients)	To investigate the the prevalence and management of people with eating disorders receiving primary health care in Australia.  analyzing how these cases are identified, treated, and referred by general practitioners (GPs).	Using secondary data from Australian national BEACH (Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health) program,  which monitors the clinical practice of primary care physicians.	The study showed that, despite eating disorders being present in primary care, they are underdiagnosed and undertreated, with low rates of referral to specialized management. Strengthening the training of professionals and integrating primary care and mental health are essential to improve care for this population.

Source: developed by the authors, 2025





## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research analyzed presented a variety of approaches, including three studies. qualitative, two observational and descriptive, and one comparative study providing a comprehensive understanding of the role, training, and challenges faced by nutritionists in the prevention and treatment of eating disorders in Primary Care.

Overall, the findings show that the authors agree on the importance of Professional training and health education as essential strategies to improve performance from the nutritionist. However, all studies also highlight the existence of significant gaps in academic training and in the provision of continuing education specifically geared towards disorders food, especially in the context of primary health care.

The study by Santos (2022), conducted in 27 primary healthcare units in the city from São Paulo where the performance of nutritionists in interviews and clinical practices was analyzed. Studies developed in these units demonstrated that the role of the nutritionist is still focused on Individual consultations and healing activities, with limited participation in collective strategies aimed at for the promotion of health and the prevention of eating disorders. The research also highlighted the lack of specific training in mental health and eating behavior, which makes it difficult to Early identification of warning signs and appropriate referral of cases.

Furthermore, Pereira (2022) noted in his study conducted in Brazil, developed from the analysis of scientific productions and records of professional practices in the area that despite the Despite a nutritionist being considered essential within a multidisciplinary team, there is a lack of Specific training and clinical guidance to guide your actions in situations involving Eating disorders. The author emphasizes the urgency of investing in continuing education. particularly in matters such as body image, eating behavior, and communication. Empathy is a fundamental factor in the proper treatment of eating disorders. Although this Although this research was not included in the present review because it was not a primary study, its results They consistently reflect the main findings of the studies analyzed in this review.

These findings align with the study by Robertson and Davies (2024), conducted in the Kingdom. United, which revealed, through interviews with 17 nutritionists and their patients, that the relationship Therapeutic factors are one of the most important elements for the effectiveness of treatment. The research highlighted that the acquisition of communication and empathy skills is directly linked to education continued and clinical supervision, highlighting the lack of structured training to prepare the nutritionists are equipped both emotionally and technically to deal with the psychological suffering of patients.

The lack of formal education was highlighted in the study by Setnick *et al.* (2022), conducted in



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The United States, with 182 registered dietitians, found that less than 10%...

The professionals received training on eating disorders during their university education.

Most mentioned that they learned independently, through reading and courses.

extracurricular activities. This information highlights the urgent need to integrate topics about disorders.

Nutrition programs should include dietary guidelines, in addition to creating continuing education policies that offer...

technical and emotional support for professionals.

Similarly, the research by Heafala *et al.* (2022), conducted in Australia with 24 nutritionists, where perceptions, experiences and challenges of these professionals were investigated in

The assessment showed that working with patients who have eating disorders is seen as...

as emotionally difficult and lacking institutional support. The authors point out that many

Professionals feel insecure and unprepared to deal with these cases, due to the absence of

Continuing education and networking for clinical supervision. This insecurity directly affects the

quality of care can also damage patient trust, an aspect that is also

evidenced in the study by Robertson *et al.* (2024), which investigated the therapeutic relationship between

nutritionists and patients with eating disorders through qualitative interviews

demonstrating that communication skills, empathy, and active listening are fundamental to the

treatment success.

Similarly, the study by Santos (2022) indicates that, in Brazil, education

Continued nutrition is not yet an established practice among primary health care nutritionists.

which restricts the development of skills to deal with complicated situations, such as

eating disorders. These findings highlight the need to implement programs for

Ongoing training focused on prevention, early diagnosis, and interdisciplinary management in

Primary Care.

The cross-sectional study conducted by Sandri E. *et al.* (2024) in Spain, involving 9,913

The study, conducted in the general adult population, aimed to assess the prevalence and factors associated with anorexia.

and to bulimia nervosa in individuals aged 31 to 50 years and demonstrated that eating disorders are not

They are not limited to young people, but also significantly affect middle-aged people.

highlighting the importance of Primary Health Care as a place for monitoring and promoting

healthy eating. Although it did not directly analyze the role of the nutritionist, the study

underlines the urgent need to empower primary health care professionals so that they can recognize and

Acting early on in relation to risky eating behaviors, especially in groups that

They are not traditionally at the center of prevention initiatives.

In this same context, the international study by Ivancic *et al.* (2021), conducted in Australia,

This complements these findings by investigating the prevalence and management of people with disorders.

Eating disorders treated in primary care. The results showed that, although the disorders



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Even though foodborne illnesses are frequently identified at this level of attention, recognition and management are crucial. The capabilities of healthcare professionals are still limited, especially due to a lack of specific training. and referral protocols. The study also showed that the interdisciplinary approach This is essential for effective care, highlighting the role of the nutritionist in conjunction with... Doctors and psychologists play a crucial role in early detection and ongoing support for patients. These results They emphasize the urgency of creating ongoing training programs focused on prevention and diagnosis. early intervention and interdisciplinary management within the context of Primary Care.

It was found that five of the six studies reviewed (Santos, 2022; Setnick *et al.*, 2022; Robertson & Davies, 2024; Heafala *et al.*, 2022; Ivancic *et al.*, 2021) especially highlight the need for further investigation into the role of the nutritionist in the treatment of Eating disorders, especially in Primary Health Care. These texts reveal gaps. both in technical and emotional training and in collaboration between different areas of health, emphasizing the importance of fostering a truly multidisciplinary and foundational approach. based on evidence.

## CONCLUSION

This integrative review revealed that health education and continuing education are essential for improving the nutritionist's performance in the treatment and prevention of disorders. food, especially in the context of primary health care. The studies analyzed indicated which, despite occupying a crucial position in promoting healthy and adequate nutrition, Significant gaps still persist in university education and the availability of programs. Continuing education that covers issues such as eating habits and mental health.

It has been observed that professional practice is often restricted by a lack of training. technical and emotional challenges, due to limited collaboration between disciplines and the lack of guidelines. Concrete guidelines for the treatment of eating disorders in primary health care. Given this scenario, it is essential To promote investments in public policies and research that focus on the training of nutritionists, In addition to promoting empirical and interventional studies that analyze the effects of continuing education. in the quality of service offered.

Therefore, it can be concluded that strengthening continuing education in health and... The expansion of research focused on the role of nutritionists in addressing eating disorders is... fundamental pathways to establishing a more compassionate, collaborative, and effective practice in prevention of eating disorders.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the need to conduct research that specifically explores the The nutritionist's perspective and experiences regarding eating disorders are important, as understanding their...

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Opinions, difficulties, and limitations can provide valuable information for improving practices.

professionals, the creation of more humanized care approaches, and the strengthening of the role

The role of nutritionists in interdisciplinary primary health care teams.

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