

Personalized Nutrition Meets Public Responsibility: The Ethics of Clinical Nutrigenomics

Claire Dubois*

Department of Food Sciences, Université de Montpellier, Montpellier, France

DESCRIPTION

The clinical integration of nutrigenetics and nutrigenomics—the study of how individual genetic differences affect nutrient metabolism and how diet influences gene expression—represents a frontier in personalized medicine. With rising interest in using genetic information to guide dietary interventions, the clinical potential of these technologies is undeniable. From improving metabolic control in type 2 diabetes to customizing nutrition plans for cardiovascular disease prevention, this approach promises a shift from overall dietary guidelines to genetically informed, individualized nutrition strategies. However, this innovation also introduces a host of ethical challenges that must be addressed to ensure responsible, equitable and patient-centered clinical practice.

One of the most pressing ethical issues concerns scientific validity and clinical readiness. Despite decades of research, the majority of gene-diet interactions currently known have small effect sizes and limited reproducibility across diverse populations. Only a handful—such as *MTHFR* gene variants affecting folate metabolism or *APOE* variants influencing lipid response—have reached a level of evidence that could justify clinical decision-making. Yet, many commercial and clinical services provide broad panels of genetic tests with little empirical backing, potentially misleading patients into believing these results provide deterministic guidance. Ethical clinical practice must be based on high-quality, reproducible science. Clinicians have a duty to critically assess the evidence supporting nutrigenetic recommendations and resist premature implementation of poorly validated tests.

Informed consent and communication of risk are foundational ethical requirements in any healthcare interaction involving genetics. Unlike traditional clinical diagnostics, nutrigenetic results are probabilistic, not predictive. For example, a variant associated with higher risk for obesity in the presence of a high-fat diet does not guarantee the development of obesity. The complexity of gene-nutrient interactions and the subtlety of their

effects necessitate nuanced communication with patients. Many individuals lack the scientific literacy to understand the implications of these tests without guidance, raising the risk of misinterpretation. It is ethically imperative that clinicians provide clear, balanced information about what nutrigenetic tests can and cannot reveal. Counseling should emphasize that genes are only one part of the nutrition-health equation, along with lifestyle, environment and socioeconomic factors.

Equity and accessibility are additional ethical challenges that the field of clinical nutrigenomics must confront. At present, the availability of personalized nutrition services is often restricted to affluent individuals through private clinics or Direct-To-Consumer (DTC) testing companies. This raises concerns about deepening health disparities—providing the benefits of preventive care and early dietary interventions only to those who can afford them. Furthermore, much of the existing nutrigenomic research is based on populations of European ancestry, limiting its generalizability to other ethnic groups and potentially exacerbating bias. Ethical clinical practice must advocate for greater inclusivity in nutrigenomic research and promote access to validated services across socioeconomic and ethnic boundaries. Public health strategies that integrate nutrigenetic tools must ensure that underserved communities are not left behind.

The clinical application of nutrigenetics and nutrigenomics holds transformative potential for personalized nutrition and preventive healthcare. However, without a strong ethical foundation, the rush to implement these technologies may do more harm than good. Ethical practice in nutrigenomics must prioritize scientific validity, informed consent, privacy, equity and transparency. It must resist commercial pressures that prioritize novelty over evidence and it must protect patients from misunderstanding and misuse of their genetic data. As this field matures, it must be guided not only by what is technically possible, but by what is ethically responsible and socially just. Only then can the promise of precision nutrition truly be realized in a way that benefits all.

Correspondence to: Claire Dubois, Department of Food Sciences, Université de Montpellier, Montpellier, France, E-mail: cdubois@umontpellier.fr

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