Proper nutrition is the cornerstone of good health, and our patients need and deserve proper nutrition, nutritional assessments, and a specific nutritional recommendation. This belief in proper nutrition for pets has been one of my main focuses throughout my career.
One of my first nutrition patients was an overweight Rottweiler named Dozer who had lost interest (i.e., energy) in playing, walks, and interacting with his owner. I have no doubt how much this owner loved this dog. Unfortunately, the dog was being overfed and overtreated—in other words, it was being “loved to death.” The human-animal bond was strong, and the owner truly believed the calories given in the form of too much food and treats was reinforcing the bond. However, the truth was the bond was being damaged as Dozer was having difficulty interacting with the owner and had become severely exercise intolerant.

After a lengthy discussion with the owner about health risks associated with obesity and education on the proper amount to feed, a weight-loss program was implemented. Dozer lost 30 pounds (yes, there were ups and downs, gains and losses), but the end result pointed to my “why”: Why did I go into veterinary medicine? Dozer was playing and wanting to go for walks again. His owner had her buddy back. The human-animal bond was further strengthened and the two were inseparable. Oh, and Dozer did not want for food—he had his needs met with constant love and affection, as opposed to constant food. This is why I love nutrition: Proper nutrition helps manage disease conditions and keeps well pets well. Imagine being able to tell an owner that if we get weight off their overweight pet, the risk for osteoarthritis, diabetes, and respiratory issues decreases. We may also be able to help that pet live longer with a better quality of life.

In 2005, I spoke to board members of the Academy of Veterinary Clinical Nutrition (ACVN) and the American Academy of Veterinary Nutrition (AAVN) about starting a veterinary technician specialty in nutrition. At this time there were about 5 to 7 specialties recognized by the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA). My belief was that nutrition was too important to animals to not have a specialty. I wanted my profession to see the importance and seize the opportunity to talk proper nutrition with pet owners. The ACVN and the AAVN were extremely supportive of the idea and my passion to involve the entire veterinary team in nutrition. In 2010, together with a few incredible nutrition technician colleagues, we formed the Academy of Veterinary Nutrition Technicians (AVNT) organizing committee and petitioned NAVTA for recognition of the Veterinary Technician Specialist (VTS) in Nutrition credential. In August 2010, the AVNT became the 10th specialty academy recognized by NAVTA.

The mission of the AVNT is to advance the area of and promote excellence in the discipline of veterinary nutrition by enhancing the skills and knowledge of veterinary nutrition technicians and promoting technicians as integral members of the veterinary nutrition team. The AVNT provides a process by which credentialed veterinary nurses/technicians may become certified as a VTS in the field of nutrition, thereby increasing the competence of those practicing in the field of veterinary nutrition.

**WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS TO BECOME A VTS (NUTRITION)?**

First, what isn’t required:
- You do not have to work with a board-certified veterinary nutritionist.
- You do not have to work in a specialty hospital.

**Credential Requirements**

Applicants must be a credentialed veterinary nurse/technician in the United States, Canada, or other country and have not obtained another VTS certification within 3 years prior to submitting an AVNT application.

After graduating from a recognized school of veterinary technology (per country accreditation) and/or becoming credentialed to practice as a veterinary technician (or its equivalent), candidates must meet education and experience requirements, as specified:

1. **Professional history and employment.** Candidates must complete 3 years/minimum 5500 hours work experience or its equivalent with no less than 75% of the experience (a minimum of 4000 hours) being dedicated to veterinary nutrition. All experience must be within 3 years of application.

2. **Continuing education (CE).** Candidates must complete at least 40 CE hours related to veterinary or animal nutrition, or nutrition research collected within 3 years of application submittal, with at least 10 hours falling within the year the application is submitted. Eighty percent must be related to canine, feline, equine, or bovine nutrition. Up to 20% can be alternate species. Submission of CE information must be on the AVNT form. CE must be RACE certified or its equivalent.

3. **Competence documentation.** Provide the documentary evidence of advanced competence in veterinary nutrition through 1 or a combination of 2 routes: clinical or research.
4. **Advanced veterinary technician nutrition skills.** Provide documentary evidence of advanced competence in the selected area of specialization through clinical experience, as demonstrated by completion of the Advanced Veterinary Nutrition Technician skill form. You will also need to cross-reference these skills on your case logs. You are not required to reference every skill in your case logs, but you are encouraged to do so. AVNT candidates must demonstrate mastery of 80% of the skills for the application packet. Mastery is defined as “consistently being able to perform with great skill and/or knowledge without being coached or directed.” Each skill should be verified and signed by the most qualified DVM or VTS available.

5. **A case record log or research log.** This log is maintained for 1 year immediately preceding the submission of the application. The case logs should include cases from October 1 of the preceding year through September 30 of the year of application. The AVNT case log form format must be utilized. A minimum of 40 cases must be recorded. Applicants are encouraged to submit more than 40 cases, with a maximum number of 60 cases.

6. **Clinical cases.** A minimum of 40 clinical cases must be recorded. The cases must reflect the management of nutrition as related to the patient and mastery of advanced veterinary nutrition skills.

7. **Research.** One year within the 3 years immediately preceding application must consist of veterinary/animal research or research using veterinary nutrition technician observations as a major portion of the study. This research shall reflect the management of the veterinary nutrition patient and mastery of advanced nutrition and research skills.

8. **Five detailed case reports.** Case reports must demonstrate expertise and understanding of principles in the management of a variety of veterinary patients or research participants requiring veterinary nutrition services. Case reports must represent at least 2 different species. The case reports should be selected from the case record log or research log.

9. **Letters of recommendation.** Submit 2 letters of recommendation from the following 4 categories: a VTS (Nutrition) member; a supporting veterinarian; a veterinarian who is a member of the AAVN; or a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (Nutrition), or other diplomates deemed appropriate by the Board.

10. **Fees.** An application fee of $50 is required. If the application is accepted and the candidate is allowed to sit for the credentialing examination, the fee for the credentialing exam is $200.

To learn more or apply, visit [nutritiontechs.com](http://nutritiontechs.com).

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**BENEFITS OF ATTAINING A VTS (NUTRITION)**

Ask yourself why you want to pursue a VTS. Is it for personal growth? Lifelong learning? Monetary gain? To provide proper nutrition for animals? Increased utilization of skills? Attaining a VTS in any specialty area takes hard work and determination. First and foremost: Do it for you. Make sure you have a support team—including family, friends, and colleagues—as it will take work, dedication, research, studying, and time. Make a pros and cons list. Look at all angles. Once you decide to go for it, do not look back! You will not regret attaining your VTS, as long as you are doing it for you. The amazing thing is that although you are doing it for yourself, your colleagues, hospital, and, most importantly, patients will benefit.

Be prepared for what comes next. Your world may open to speaking and writing opportunities. You will have a whole new set of like-minded colleagues in your network. And you will have succeeded in furthering your “why,” which benefits our beloved patients. Your passion will take you to the finish line, where together, with all the VTS (Nutrition) colleagues, we will apply proper nutrition principles with the understanding that proper dietary management is an important factor in maximizing health, performance, and longevity and managing numerous diseases. And we will apply this to every patient, every time. **TVN**

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**Kara M. Burns**

Kara is a licensed veterinary technician with master’s degrees in physiology and counseling psychology. Kara is the founder and past president of the Academy of Veterinary Nutrition Technicians and has attained her VTS (Nutrition). She is the editor in chief of *Today’s Veterinary Nurse*, works as an independent nutritional consultant, and is a past president of NAVTA. Kara is also the director of veterinary nursing development for Wellhaven Pet Health. She has authored many articles, textbooks, and textbook chapters and is an internationally invited speaker.