

Exam Content Outline

Purpose

The aim of the American Council on Exercise® (ACE®) Health Coach Certification examination is to evaluate if individuals have the knowledge and skill necessary to perform tasks that are critical for safe and competent practice as ACE Certified Health Coaches. To ensure the ACE Health Coach Certification stays relevant and current, ACE conducts a role delineation study (RDS) every five years to update the composition and focus of the ACE Health Coach Certification program and exams.

In February 2021, ACE and Scantron Corporation, a testing service company that designs, develops, administers, and evaluates certification and licensure programs and examinations, conducted an RDS for the ACE Health Coach Certification to identify the primary job tasks performed by health coaches on a regular basis. The fundamental purpose of this RDS was to establish and validate appropriate content areas for the ACE Health Coach Certification examination. The result of this process includes this exam content outline, which serves as a blueprint for each ACE Health Coach Certification examination. As you prepare for the exam, it is important to remember that all exam questions are based on this outline.

The blueprint is comprised of tasks, knowledge, and skills necessary for a health coach to perform job responsibilities at the entry-level of competence for the profession. These tasks, knowledge, and skills were established by the RDS panel of health coach subject matter experts, and then sent out to more than 8,000 ACE Certified Health Coaches for validation.

It is the position of ACE that the recommendations outlined here are not exhaustive to the qualifications of a health coach, but represent a minimum level of proficiency and theoretical knowledge required to practice as a competent and safe health coach. All tasks are assessed on every exam; however, it is important to note that not all knowledge and skill statements listed in the exam content outline will be addressed on each exam administration.

For the most up-to-date version of the Exam Content Outline, please [click here](#) and download a free PDF.

Attention Exam Candidates!

When preparing for an ACE certification exam, be aware that the material presented in any textbook or course may become outdated due to the evolving nature of the health and fitness industries, as well as new developments in current and ongoing research. These exams are based on an in-depth job analysis and an industry-wide validation survey. By design, these exams assess a candidate's knowledge and application of the most current scientifically based professional standards and guidelines. The dynamic nature of this field requires that ACE certification exams be regularly updated to ensure that they reflect the latest industry findings and research. Therefore, the knowledge and skills required to pass these exams are not solely represented in any text or course. ACE strongly encourages all exam candidates, exercise professionals, and health coaches to keep abreast of new developments, guidelines, and standards from a variety of valid industry sources.

Description

The 2021 ACE Health Coach role delineation study defined the task, knowledge, and skill statements in the current exam content outline. Tasks are the critical functions that are regularly performed and required for competent practice in a job or profession. Domains are the major areas of responsibilities or activities of a job or profession, and they represent logical grouping of tasks.

Knowledge and skill statements list the knowledge and/or skills necessary to perform a given task. They include information, actions, or other learnable skills a candidate must possess in order to perform a specific task. An organized body of factual or procedural information is called knowledge, while the proficient physical, verbal, or mental interaction with, or guidance of, data, people, or objects is called skill.

The exam content outline for the ACE Health Coach Certification examination has 18 tasks grouped into five domains. Through the RDS process, each domain was assigned a weight that represents the approximate percentage of exam questions that will fall within that domain on each exam. The weights were derived from the results of the validation survey that was sent out to all ACE Certified Health Coaches. The ACE Health Coach Certification exam content outline is presented below, with each domain and associated percentage weight, the tasks that fall within each domain, and the knowledge and skill statements that are associated with performing each task.

To learn more about registering for the ACE Health Coach Certification examination, including eligibility requirements and ACE Certification Exam FAQs, please go to www.ACEfitness.org/fitness-certifications/schedule-your-exam

DOMAIN I: APPLYING PRINCIPLES OF BEHAVIOR-CHANGE COACHING 24%

TASK 1: Establish trust and rapport with clients using evidence-based coaching strategies in order to build and maintain collaborative relationships and elicit information about client goals, values, and beliefs.

Knowledge of:

1. Verbal and nonverbal communication
2. Considerations related to diverse populations
3. Factors that establish trust (e.g., empathy, rapport)
4. Elements of an inclusive environment for establishing rapport
5. Impact of personal biases on coaching
6. Values and benefits of a client-centered approach
7. Theories and models of behavior change
8. Considerations for initial coaching sessions (e.g., coaching presence, physical environment)
9. Effective group dynamics (e.g., type of group, group personality, time management, managing discord)

Skill in:

1. Using the principles of client-centered coaching (e.g., open-ended questions, affirmations, reflective listening, summarizing)
2. Listening with an intent to understand each client's perspective (e.g., active listening, reflective listening)

3. Giving and interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues effectively
4. Establishing a positive client–coach relationship
5. Fostering a positive and inclusive environment for effective communication
6. Honoring the client as the expert in their own life
7. Fostering a sense of community among participants in group settings (e.g., social support, collective learning)

TASK 2: Guide clients to identify strengths, barriers, and available resources using established methods and appropriate tools in order to support them in making sustainable health behavior changes.

Knowledge of:

1. Social determinants of health
2. Theories and models of behavior change
3. Resources that facilitate health behavior change (e.g., social support, technology, mindfulness, educational materials)
4. Common barriers to change
5. Types of motivation (e.g., intrinsic, extrinsic)
6. Motivational strategies (e.g., motivational interviewing, positive psychology)
7. Facilitators of change (e.g., goal setting, growth mindset)
8. Evidence-based coaching strategies
9. Effective interviewing techniques (e.g., motivational interviewing, active listening)

Skill in:

1. Identifying and addressing barriers to change
2. Identifying and encouraging facilitators of change
3. Supporting clients in their discovery of personal strengths (e.g., character strengths survey, personality tests)
4. Assisting clients in identifying and using available resources
5. Collaborating with clients to manage setbacks and celebrate successes
6. Supporting clients in gaining insight and awareness of their health behavior–related actions
7. Supporting clients in gaining an understanding of their role in making healthful choices
8. Empowering clients to be accountable for their decisions and actions (e.g., reflections, self-tracking)

TASK 3: Facilitate client-directed behavior change using evidence-based coaching strategies in order to promote and enhance well-being.

Knowledge of:

1. Theories of behavior change (e.g., social cognitive theory and self-perception theory)
2. Models of behavior change (e.g., transtheoretical model of behavior change, health belief model, biopsychosocial model, ecological model)
3. Evidence-based coaching strategies
4. Strategies for building self-efficacy
5. Impact of lifestyle choices on health and quality of life (e.g., lifestyle medicine)

6. Health literacy
7. Health equity and social determinants of health

Skill in:

1. Applying theories and models of behavior change
2. Identifying appropriate coaching strategies to promote self-efficacy
3. Using evidence-based coaching strategies to promote learning (e.g., elicit-provide-elicited)
4. Using evidence-based coaching strategies to promote behavior change (e.g., motivational interviewing)

DOMAIN II: Conducting and Interpreting Assessments
19%

TASK 1: Gather information about the client using interviews and other methods in order to select relevant tools and assessments in collaboration with the client.

Knowledge of:

1. Effective interviewing techniques (e.g., motivational interviewing, open- vs. closed-ended questions, active listening)
2. Awareness of personal bias (e.g., implicit bias)
3. Assessment tools (e.g., health history, risk-factor screening, readiness for change)
4. Risk factors
5. Health equity and social determinants of health

Skill in:

1. Conducting interviews (e.g., motivational interviewing, open- vs. closed-ended questions, active listening, listening for change talk)
2. Selecting appropriate assessment tools based on gathered information from client interviews
3. Identifying social determinants of health specific to the client
4. Identifying a client's health literacy
5. Communicating with clients about the selection, use, and interpretation of assessments

TASK 2: Conduct client-centered assessments in order to obtain health, medical, wellness, and lifestyle information and discover client values, strengths, and beliefs.

Knowledge of:

1. Appropriate assessments for health coaches to use with clients, including, but not limited to, physical activity, nutrition, lifestyle, wellness, health history, and behavioral health
2. Effective interviewing techniques (e.g., motivational interviewing, open- vs. closed-ended questions, active listening)
3. Methods and environments (e.g., telephonic, virtual) for administering assessments
4. Considerations for conducting assessments for individuals with health or medical issues
5. Considerations related to diverse populations

Skill in:

1. Administering assessments, including, but not limited to, physical activity, nutrition, lifestyle, wellness, health history, and behavioral health
2. Conducting interviews (e.g., motivational interviewing, open- vs. closed-ended questions, active listening)

3. Using appropriate technology to conduct assessments
4. Recognizing unique client needs
5. Collaborating with clients to conduct assessments
6. Communicating with clients about the selection, use, and interpretation of assessments

TASK 3: Interpret results in order to identify the need for medical clearance and/or referrals, establish baselines, and facilitate collaborative plan development.

Knowledge of:

1. Appropriate assessments for health coaches to use with clients, including, but not limited to, physical activity, nutrition, lifestyle, wellness, health history, and behavioral health
2. Social determinants of health
3. Factors that warrant referral
4. Motivational strategies (e.g., motivational interviewing, positive psychology)
5. Client access to resources
6. Stages of behavior change
7. Roles and responsibilities of various healthcare providers for referral

Skill in:

1. Communicating with clients about the selection, use, and interpretation of assessments
2. Interpreting assessments, including, but not limited to, physical activity, nutrition, lifestyle, wellness, medical and health history, and behavioral health
3. Differentiating types of risk factors (i.e., modifiable vs. non-modifiable)
4. Identifying social determinants of health specific to the client
5. Identifying the need for referral
6. Referring to appropriate healthcare professionals
7. Making appropriate referrals

DOMAIN III: Developing Multidimensional Client-centered Plans 21%

TASK 1: Establish the client's goals and objectives collaboratively using assessment data to guide the development of the plan.

Knowledge of:

1. Interpretation of assessments (e.g., physical activity, nutrition, lifestyle, wellness, health history, behavioral health, social determinants of health)
2. Theories and models of behavior change
3. Evidence-based coaching strategies
4. Acute and chronic conditions that can be improved with health behavior changes
5. Role of healthful lifestyle habits in the prevention and self-management of chronic disease
6. Effective goal-setting strategies (e.g., SMART)

Skill in:

1. Incorporating client values, strengths, and vision in setting goals and objectives
2. Identifying appropriate behavior-change strategies based on assessment findings
3. Using motivational interviewing with clients for goal setting
4. Facilitating client-centered goal setting
5. Guiding clients to prioritize health behaviors and related goals

TASK 2: Co-create a client-centered plan consistent with client values, strengths, and beliefs in order to support the client in achieving their goals and objectives.**Knowledge of:**

1. Dimensions of wellness (e.g., psychological, physical, emotional, spiritual)
2. Social determinants of health
3. Guidelines, strategies, and best practices for plan development
4. Triggers and other factors that affect sustainable change
5. Strategies for overcoming barriers (e.g., time management, stress management, accountability plan)
6. Considerations related to individualizing plans for diverse populations
7. Implicit bias and cultural responsiveness

Skill in:

1. Guiding client-centered improvement of dimensions of health and wellness
2. Using motivational interviewing with clients for plan development
3. Selecting appropriate tools for plan development
4. Facilitating client-centered plan development
5. Incorporating health, medical, and safety considerations into behavior-change plans
6. Identifying and exploring triggers and barriers that affect sustainable change
7. Developing a culturally responsive plan that reflects client values, beliefs, and vision

TASK 3: Integrate relevant community resources and health professionals into the behavior-change plan in order to support the client in achieving their goals and objectives.**Knowledge of:**

1. Relevant, accessible, and equitable community resources
2. Roles and responsibilities of various health professionals for referral
3. Common health-related misinformation and disinformation
4. Evidence-based resources and programs
5. Self-management skills and strategies

Skill in:

1. Building a referral network
2. Collaborating with other health professionals (e.g., communicating, reporting client updates)
3. Referring clients to appropriate community and professional resources
4. Guiding clients to appropriate sources of information
5. Fostering client self-management

DOMAIN IV: IMPLEMENTING AND ADJUSTING MULTIDIMENSIONAL CLIENT-CENTERED PLANS 19%

TASK 1: Implement client-centered plans collaboratively using evidence-based coaching practices in order to facilitate client progress toward their healthful lifestyle and behavior-change goals.

Knowledge of:

1. Evidence-based coaching strategies
2. Health, medical, and safety considerations and precautions
3. Methods for delivering behavior-change program components (e.g., in-person, telehealth, digital, group settings)
4. Modifiable and nonmodifiable risk factors
5. Program factors that facilitate improvement in health behaviors and reduction in modifiable risk

Skill in:

1. Applying evidence-based coaching strategies
2. Determining each client's attitudes, preferences, and readiness to change as it relates to desired outcomes
3. Providing relevant information and guidance to clients
4. Leveraging available technology in program implementation (e.g., telehealth, digital, apps)
5. Facilitating behavior change
6. Identifying barriers to sustainable change in collaboration with the client
7. Incorporating health, medical, and safety considerations into behavior-change plans

TASK 2: Provide the client with opportunities for further learning and feedback on health topics, behavior-change strategies, skill development, and overcoming barriers in order to empower and support the client in implementing the plan.

Knowledge of:

1. Methods for providing feedback models
2. Educational strategies and teaching methods
3. Support systems
4. Behavior-change strategies
5. Factors that build and promote self-efficacy, confidence, and sustainable change
6. Techniques for sharing information and resources
7. Factors that impact motivation (e.g., extrinsic, intrinsic, feedback)
8. Health literacy, health equity, and social determinants of health

Skill in:

1. Engaging clients in the change process
2. Incorporating support systems into the plan
3. Identifying appropriate opportunities to provide clients with information, education, and resources
4. Identifying and addressing barriers to change and goal achievement

5. Using motivational interviewing
6. Providing effective feedback
7. Providing information and resources within the coaching process
8. Facilitating self-efficacy and adherence
9. Identifying and addressing health literacy, health equity, and social determinants of health

TASK 3: Evaluate the effectiveness of the plan in collaboration with clients and stakeholders to consistently monitor outcomes, support progress toward program goals, and refer as needed.

Knowledge of:

1. Methods for delivering behavior-change program components (e.g., in-person, telehealth, virtual, group settings, technology-supported coaching techniques)
2. Modifiable and nonmodifiable risk factors
3. Support systems
4. Health, medical, and safety considerations and precautions
5. Strategies for the ongoing assessment of client progress and goals
6. Triggers, lapses, and relapses
7. Self-monitoring tools and techniques

Skill in:

1. Recognizing changes in client behaviors and health status
2. Leveraging available technology and data (e.g., telehealth, digital, apps)
3. Reevaluating client goals
4. Determining each client's attitudes, preferences, and readiness to change as they relate to desired outcomes
5. Identifying and addressing barriers to sustainable change in collaboration with the client
6. Recognizing and addressing the client's triggers, lapses, and relapses
7. Selecting appropriate self-monitoring techniques

TASK 4: Adjust client-centered plans collaboratively based on ongoing program evaluations in order to address barriers to change and encourage progress, accountability, motivation, and learning.

Knowledge of:

1. Evidence-based coaching strategies
2. Appropriate use and interpretation of assessments that measure physical and behavioral health
3. Barriers to sustainable change
4. Strategies that enhance self-efficacy
5. Lapse-prevention strategies
6. Strategies for the ongoing assessment of client goals
7. Methods for delivering behavior-change program components (e.g., in-person, telehealth, digital, group settings)

Skill in:

1. Interpreting and communicating progress toward client goals
2. Collaborating with clients to modify goals and adjust plans
3. Collaborating with clients to identify strategies for overcoming barriers
4. Collaborating with clients to develop coping strategies
5. Empowering clients to take responsibility for their decisions and actions
6. Supporting progress toward goals (e.g., celebrating success, using affirmations)
7. Implementing lapse-prevention strategies
8. Adjusting methods of delivering behavior-change program components (e.g., in-person, telehealth, digital, group settings)
9. Displaying empathy

DOMAIN V: Professional Conduct and Risk Management**17%**

TASK 1: Adhere to responsible business practices, legal requirements, the ACE Code of Ethics, and scope-of-practice guidelines in order to maintain professional standards and manage risk.

Knowledge of:

1. Scope of practice for ACE Certified Health Coaches
2. ACE Code of Ethics and Professional Practices and Disciplinary Procedures
3. Pertinent laws and regulations for health coaching in different settings (e.g., healthcare, workplace wellness)
4. Industry standards for health coaches
5. Responsible business practices
6. Best practices pertaining to professional and personal boundaries
7. Roles of relevant healthcare professionals
8. Principles of risk management
9. Appropriate referral sources and protocols

Skill in:

1. Establishing and maintaining professional and personal boundaries
2. Building a referral network
3. Recognizing when to refer clients
4. Recognizing, preventing, and managing risk
5. Establishing and maintaining responsible business and marketing practices (e.g., use of social media, technology, email, communications)

TASK 2: Maintain accurate and confidential records adhering to applicable standards, guidelines, and laws in order to ensure quality care and protect client privacy.

Knowledge of:

1. Requirements pertaining to protected health information (e.g., HIPAA)
2. Documentation systems (e.g., electronic medical record, SOAP notes)
3. Local, state, and federal laws
4. Risk-management strategies
5. Systems and tools for maintaining secure client information

Skill in:

1. Retaining client information in a secure and confidential manner
2. Communicating professionally and with respect for client confidentiality
3. Leveraging available technology for secure and confidential storage of client information
4. Adhering to appropriate workplace guidelines and applicable laws

TASK 3: Respond to emergencies, potential safety hazards, and high-risk situations by developing and following policy and procedure in order to ensure safety and reduce liability.

Knowledge of:

1. Emergency action plans and related policies and procedures
2. Situations that pose risk to clients, coaches, and others

Skill in:

1. Recognizing the need to activate emergency medical services
2. Recognizing, mitigating, and managing risk
3. Creating and executing emergency action plans

TASK 4: Enhance professional competence by staying current with health and wellness technology, research, and evidence-based coaching practice in order to build proficiency as a health coach and optimize client outcomes.

Knowledge of:

1. Technology used in health coaching
2. Criteria for evaluating the quality and applicability of information
3. Reliable sources for evidence-based information
4. Current industry standards related to health coaching

Skill in:

1. Identifying sources of credible information
2. Applying current evidence-based information to practice
3. Leveraging available technology in health coaching

TASK 5: Create an inclusive and equitable environment for diverse individuals and respond to their needs in order to promote behavior change, well-being, and long-term positive health outcomes.

Knowledge of:

1. Principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion
2. Influence of cultural beliefs, attitudes, individual identities, and values on lifestyle behaviors
3. Credible sources of information about cultural beliefs, attitudes, identities, and values as they relate to health equity
4. Social determinants of health
5. Communication best practices that facilitate an inclusive environment (e.g., verbal and nonverbal communication)

Skill in:

1. Demonstrating a commitment to culturally and linguistically appropriate health coaching
2. Providing an inclusive environment
3. Recognizing social determinants of health and their influence on health equity
4. Participating effectively as a member of a diverse interdisciplinary team