

# Dietary Technician

## Job Description:

Dietary technicians assist dietitians or nutritionists in planning, implementing, and supervising food service operations. Food provides the body with nutrients that are necessary to maintain health and prevent illness. Our eating habits have an important influence on our health status. Dietary technicians, under the supervision of a dietitian, work with individuals or groups to plan menus and diets. Their principal goal is to help those who have special dietary needs to manage their diets and control their food intake. They also promote healthy eating habits and suggest changes in the diet that would improve the long-term health of individuals not currently suffering from an illness.

Many employment opportunities exist for dietary technicians. They are employed in both health care and commercial food service settings. Examples of these settings include hospitals, extended care centers, nursing homes, prison systems, schools, cafeterias, food manufacturers, restaurants, and fast food outlets. Still others are in private practice and work with a dietitian to assess the dietary needs of individual clients, such as diabetic patients, and teach them to make healthy food choices.

There are several major practice areas for dietary technicians:

- **Clinical** (therapeutic): work with dietitians to provide consultation services for patients in institutions by assessing their needs and developing programs and diets to address these needs.
- **Management** (administrative): assist dietitians to supervise meal services in all types of large institutions, such as hospitals and schools.
- **Community/public health**: teach and promote improved food habits of the general public; inform the public of food industry tricks to deceive the public into thinking a particular food item is healthy for them. For example, a company may use the word lite on products, which most consumers would interpret as meaning light in fat, but it may only mean that it is lighter in texture or weight.

## Duties and Responsibilities:

- Assist dietitians or nutritionists in planning and supervising food service operations.
- Assess individual dietary needs by conducting interviews with patients.
- Based on the assessment, work with the dietitian to develop an effective meal plan.
- Under the supervision of a dietitian, provide nutritional information to clients.
- Supervise the preparation and serving of food.
- Assist the dietitian with administrative functions.
- Create menus for individuals as well as for large-scale food preparation under the direction of a dietitian or nutritionist.
- Purchase food preparation equipment and supplies and monitor inventories.
- Ensure that sanitary regulations are followed.
- Teach patients and family members about nutrition and special dietary needs and practices.
- Promote healthy eating habits.
- Assist dietitians with research in food, nutrition, and food service systems.

## Personal Qualities:

Many jobs in dietetics require working with people to change habits and behaviors so tact, good communication skills, and the ability to teach and motivate are important qualities. The eating habits of individuals can be difficult to change, so patience and creative problem-solving ability are also necessary.

Dietary technicians should be in good health and follow good eating habits themselves because they serve as role models for healthy eating habits. Those who work directly with patients and their families should be compassionate and interested in helping others.

### **Physical Requirements:**

Dieticians working in institutions and/or managing food preparation may be on their feet for long periods of time.

### **Educational Requirements:**

On-the-job training is a frequent path to becoming a dietary technician. Two-year college programs are also available. Courses focus on food and nutrition and have a supervised clinical component that may last from several weeks to several months. Completion of these requirements allows the individual to qualify to take the registration examination to become a registered dietary technician.

### **Certification Requirements:**

Completing the educational and practical experience of a dietary technician program allows an individual to take a registration examination. Candidates who pass the exam may use the designation DTR (dietetic technician registered) after their name.

### **Projected Outlook for this Career:**

Employment projections are higher than average for dietary technicians. Positive influences include the increasing awareness of the connection between diet and health and growth in the number of aging adults who require institutional care. The slowest employment growth area is in hospitals because patient stays are shorter than in the past.

### **Salary Information:**

In 2002, the median annual income for dietary technicians was \$22,490, with the middle 50% earning between \$16,900 and \$29,480.

### **Career Ladders:**

Dietary technicians with additional education can become dieticians or nutritionists. (See the profile on dietician/nutritionist for more information on this career.) With experience, they may be advanced to supervisory positions in the dietary department. Some dietary technicians write articles on nutrition for magazines or newspapers or start their own consulting businesses. Sales positions in pharmaceuticals, health foods, or organic food cooperatives are also possibilities.

### **To Learn More and Prepare:**

- Obtain information from the American Dietetic Association and the Society for Nutrition Education.
- Explore the Web Links provided in this profile.
- Review journals on dietetics such as Today's Dietician and the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior.
- Conduct an informational interview or job shadow a dietary technician to learn more about the duties performed.
- Explore the wide variety of positions available for dietary technicians.
- Obtain employment or a volunteer position in the field of dietetics.
- Develop your interpersonal and communication skills.
- Investigate scholarship and grant programs designed for students interested in dietetics.
- In high school, take courses in science, especially chemistry and biology, as well as courses in math, English, and psychology.

- Explore the best route for training for your geographic area and for the types of settings in which you plan to work.
- Learn more about the licensing requirements of state(s) in which you might want to work.

### **Professional Organizations:**

American Dietetic Association  
120 South Riverside Plaza  
Suite 2000  
Chicago, IL 60606-6995  
(800) 877-1600  
<http://www.eatright.org>

Society for Nutrition Education  
7150 Winton Drive  
Suite 300  
Indianapolis, IN 46268  
(800) 235-6690  
<http://www.sne.org>

### **Web Links:**

American Dietetic Association  
Contains information about careers, educational requirements, accredited schools, and credentialing.  
<http://www.eatright.org>

American Society for Nutritional Sciences  
Research society dedicated to improving life through nutrition. Web site contains information about nutrition as a scientific field and a list of worldwide job openings in the science of nutrition.  
<http://www.asns.org>

Commission on Dietetic Registration  
Credentialing agency for the American Dietetic Association. Includes links to state licensing boards.  
<http://www.cdrnet.org>

U.S. National Agricultural Library  
Government resource containing up-to-date articles and information about food, nutrition, and various health conditions.  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov>

Nutrition Navigator by Tufts University  
The School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts rates and lists major nutrition Web sites.  
<http://www.navigator.tufts.edu>