

Dietitian/Nutritionist

Job Description:

Dietitians apply the principles of nutrition, in what is becoming a high-tech science, to food and meal planning. Food provides the body with nutrients necessary to maintain health and prevent illness. Our eating habits have an important influence on our health status. Dietitians work with people who have special dietary needs as well as helping others develop proper eating habits to improve their health. Dietitians are also knowledgeable about sanitation, safety regulations, purchasing, and other aspects of food preparation.

There are a great variety of professional opportunities for dietitians. They are qualified to perform many kinds of tasks in a variety of settings. These settings include health care facilities, such as hospitals, long-term care facilities, and health maintenance organizations (HMOs), in which dietitians function as part of the health care team, recommending diets and feeding techniques to fulfill specific patient needs. They may work in institutions such as schools and prisons, managing the purchase and preparation of meals. Dietitians with advanced degrees may choose to conduct research in universities or government agencies or promote healthy eating through education. Some dietitians work for food manufacturers, restaurants, or supermarkets where they assess and improve the nutritional value of foods and prepare marketing materials. Still others are in private practice and work with individual clients, such as diabetic patients, assessing their dietary needs and teaching them to make healthy food choices.

There are several major practice areas for dietitians:

- **Clinical** (therapeutic): provide services for patients in institutions by assessing needs and developing programs and diets to address these needs
- **Management** (administrative): supervise meal services in all types of large institutions, including the purchase of food and equipment and the hiring and supervision of staff
- **Consultant**: work independently by contracting with facilities and/or individuals
- **Community/public health**: teach and promote health through proper eating habits
- **Research**: conduct studies and experiments in the area of nutrition and food science

Duties and Responsibilities:

- Assess dietary needs by conducting interviews with patients and reviewing medical records and lab reports.
- Plan special diets for a variety of conditions.
- Create menus for individuals as well as for large scale food preparation.
- Plan nutritional support for patients who cannot eat by mouth.
- Purchase food preparation equipment and supplies.
- Manage food preparation departments.
- Ensure that sanitary regulations are followed.
- Teach patients and family members about nutrition and special dietary needs and practices.
- Consult with other health care professionals.
- Promote healthy eating habits.
- Conduct research.

Personal Qualities:

Many jobs in dietetics require working with people to change habits and behavior, so tact, good communication skills, and the ability to teach and motivate are important qualities. Dietitians who work directly with patients and their families should be compassionate and interested in helping others. All dietitians must be able to work independently, accept responsibility, and complete detailed tasks.

Physical Requirements:

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

Educational Requirements:

The minimum educational requirement to work as a dietitian is a bachelor's degree in dietetics, nutrition, food management, or a related area. Becoming a registered dietitian requires taking certain courses that are approved by the Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education of the American Dietetic Association (CADE). Typical courses in a dietetic program include microbiology, chemistry, anatomy, physiology, economics, computer science, food and nutrition science, and food service management systems. Students must also complete supervised practical experience which may be completed in one of two ways: in conjunction with an American Dietetic Association-accredited educational program (called a "coordinated program") or by completing a six to twelve month CADE-approved practice in settings such as a health care facility or a food service corporation. Supervised practice programs offer at least one emphasis area in which students can begin to develop professional proficiency. Students who wish to teach, conduct research, or work in public health usually earn advanced degrees. In fact, many dietitians choose to earn advanced degrees.

Certification Requirements:

Forty-six states regulate the practice of dietitians, although the specific requirements vary by state: some require licensure, others require certification, and one state requires registration. Dietitians who graduate with a bachelor's degree from an approved school, complete supervised practice, and pass a national exam can earn the Registered Dietitian (RD) credential awarded by the CADE. This designation is required for most jobs as a dietitian. Continuing education courses must be completed on a regular basis to maintain the RD credential. In addition to the RD designation, additional certifications may be earned in specialized areas such as pediatric nutrition and diabetes education.

Projected Outlook for this Career:

Employment projections are average to good for dietitians with employment expected to grow at least as fast as the average for all occupations. Positive influences include the increasing awareness of the connection between diet and health and the growing aging population with increasing needs for institutional care. The slowest growth in positions is in hospitals because patient stays are shorter than in the past. The fastest projected employment growth is in long-term care, home health, and physicians' clinics.

Salary Information:

In 2004, the annual income for dietitians ranged from \$28,000 to \$59,600.

Career Ladders:

Dietitians in large facilities may advance to assistant and associate positions or they may be promoted to supervisory or management positions. They may become directors of food management services or go into business for themselves as consultant dietitians. Dietitians with advanced degrees may conduct research or teach in universities.

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 professional journals such as Today's Dietician and the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior.

- Conduct an informational interview or job shadow a dietitian to learn more about the duties performed.
- Explore the wide variety of positions available for dietitians.
- Obtain employment or a volunteer position in the field of dietetics.
- Keep a record of your work and/or volunteer experience.
- Develop your interpersonal and communication skills.
- Investigate scholarship and grant programs designed for student interested in dietetics.
- In high school, take courses in science, especially chemistry and biology. Also take math, business, English, and psychology courses.
- Contact educational programs for information about their admission requirements and curriculum.
- Learn about the regulations for dietitians in the 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 Dr.
 Suite 300
 Indianapolis, IN 46268
 (800) 235-6690
<http://www.sne.org>

Web Links:

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

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>

Utah State University
 Site is maintained by the university and dedicated to dietetics. Click on "Academics" and type dietetics into search to view information about the university's dietetic academic program which is representative of the many programs nationwide that offer degrees in dietetics and nutrition.
<http://www.usu.edu>

Committee on Dietetic Registration
 Credentialing agency for the American Dietetic Association. Includes links to state licensing boards.
www.cdrnet.org

Great Valley Publishing Company
 This company publishes Today's Dietician and maintains a list of nationwide job openings in dietetics and other allied health careers.
www.gvpub.com

National Agricultural Library

Government resource containing up-to-date articles and information about food, nutrition, and various health conditions.

www.nal.usda.gov

Nutrition Navigator by Tufts University

The School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts rates and lists the major nutrition Web sites.

www.navigator.tufts.edu