

Registered Dietitian

Professional Activities

Dietitians and *nutritionists* plan food and nutrition programs, supervise meal preparation, and oversee the serving of meals. They prevent and treat illnesses by promoting healthy eating habits and recommending dietary modifications. For example, dietitians might teach a patient with high blood pressure how to use less salt when preparing meals, or create a diet reduced in fat and sugar for an overweight patient. Dietitians manage food service systems for institutions such as hospitals and schools, promote sound eating habits through education, and conduct research. Many dietitians specialize, becoming a clinical dietitian, community dietitian, management dietitian, or consultant.

Clinical dietitians provide nutritional services to patients in hospitals, nursing care facilities, and other institutions. They assess patients' nutritional needs, develop and implement nutrition programs, and evaluate and report the results. They also confer with doctors and other healthcare professionals to coordinate medical and nutritional needs. Some clinical dietitians specialize in managing the weight of overweight patients or in the care of renal (kidney), diabetic, or critically ill patients. In addition, clinical dietitians in nursing care facilities, small hospitals, or correctional facilities may manage the food service department.

Community dietitians counsel individuals and groups on nutritional practices designed to prevent disease and promote health. Working in places such as public health clinics, home health agencies, and health maintenance organizations, community dietitians evaluate individual needs, develop nutritional care plans, and instruct individuals and their families. Dietitians working in home health agencies provide instruction on grocery shopping and food preparation to the elderly, children, and individuals with special needs. Increased public interest in nutrition has led to job opportunities in food manufacturing, advertising, and marketing. In these areas, dietitians analyze foods, prepare literature for distribution, or report on issues such as dietary fiber, vitamin supplements, or the nutritional content of recipes.

Management dietitians oversee large-scale meal planning and preparation in healthcare facilities, company cafeterias, prisons, and schools. They hire, train, and direct other dietitians and food service workers; budget for and purchase food, equipment, and supplies; enforce sanitary and safety regulations; and prepare records and reports.

Consultant dietitians work under contract with healthcare facilities or in their own private practice. They perform nutrition screenings for their clients and offer advice on diet-related concerns such as weight loss and cholesterol reduction. Some work for wellness programs, sports teams, supermarkets, and other nutrition-related businesses. They may consult with food service managers, providing expertise in sanitation, safety procedures, menu development, budgeting, and planning.

Educational Requirements

Becoming a dietitian or nutritionist usually requires at least a bachelor's degree in dietetics, foods and nutrition, food service systems management, or a related area. Graduate degrees also are available. College students in these majors take courses in foods, nutrition, institution management, chemistry, biochemistry, biology, microbiology, and physiology. Other suggested courses include business, mathematics, statistics, computer science, psychology, sociology, and economics. High school students interested in becoming a dietitian or nutritionist should take courses in biology, chemistry, mathematics, health, and communications.

Of the 46 States and jurisdictions with laws governing dietetics, 33 require licensure, 12 require statutory certification, and one requires registration. Specific requirements vary by State. As a result, interested candidates should determine the requirements of the State in which they want to work before sitting for any exam.

In States that require licensure, only people who are licensed can work as dietitians and nutritionists. States that require statutory certification limit the use of occupational titles to people who meet certain requirements; individuals without certification can still practice as a dietitian or nutritionist but without using certain titles. Registration is the least restrictive form of State regulation of dietitians and nutritionists. Unregistered people are permitted to practice as a dietitian or nutritionist.

Although not required, the Commission on Dietetic Registration of the American Dietetic Association awards the Registered Dietitian credential to those who pass an exam after completing academic coursework and a supervised internship. This certification is different from the statutory certification regulated by some States and discussed in the previous section. To maintain a Registered Dietitian status, workers must complete at least 75 credit hours in approved continuing education classes every 5 years.

A supervised internship, required for certification, can be completed in one of two ways. The first requires the completion of a program accredited by the Commission on Dietetic Registration. As of September 2009, there were 51 accredited programs that combined academic and supervised practice experience and generally lasted 4 to 5 years. The second option requires the completion of 900 hours of supervised practice experience in any of the 243 accredited internships. These internships may be full-time programs lasting 6 to 12 months or part-time programs lasting 2 years.

Experienced dietitians may advance to management positions, such as assistant director, associate director, or director of a dietetic department, or may become self-employed. Some dietitians specialize in areas such as renal, diabetic, cardiovascular, or pediatric dietetics. Others leave the occupation to become sales representatives for equipment, pharmaceutical, or food manufacturers. A master's degree can help some workers to advance their careers, particularly in career paths related to research, advanced clinical positions, or public health.

Academic Programs

[Dominican University River](#)

[Illinois State University](#)

[Loyola University Chicago](#)

[Northern Illinois University](#)

[Olivet Nazarene University](#)

[Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science](#)

[Rush University](#)

[Southern Illinois University](#)

[University of Illinois at Chicago](#)

[University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#)

[Western University](#)

Employment/Salary Outlook

Job growth will result from an increasing emphasis on disease prevention through improved dietary habits. A growing and aging population will boost demand for nutritional counseling and treatment in hospitals, residential care facilities, schools, prisons, community health programs, and home healthcare agencies. Public interest in nutrition and increased emphasis on health education and prudent lifestyles also will spur demand, especially in food service management.

Also, with increased public awareness of obesity and diabetes, Medicare coverage has been expanded to include medical nutrition therapy for renal and diabetic patients, creating job growth for dietitians and nutritionists specializing in those diseases.

Employment growth, however, may be constrained if some employers substitute other workers, such as health educators, food service managers, and dietetic technicians, to do work related to nutrition. Also, demand for nutritional therapy services is related to the ability of patients to pay, either out-of-pocket or through health insurance, and although more insurance plans now cover nutritional therapy services, the extent of such coverage varies among plans. Growth may be curbed by limitations on insurance reimbursement for dietetic services.

Hospitals will continue to employ a large number of dietitians and nutritionists to provide medical nutritional therapy and plan meals. But hospitals also will continue to contract with outside agencies for food service and move medical nutritional therapy to outpatient care facilities, slowing job growth in hospitals relative to food service, outpatient facilities, and other employers.

Finally, the number of dietitian positions in nursing care facilities is expected to decline, as these establishments continue to contract with outside agencies for food services. However, employment is expected to grow rapidly in contract providers of food services, in outpatient care centers, and in offices of physicians and other health practitioners.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2021		
		Low	Median	High
United States	Hourly	\$20.45	\$29.64	\$45.02
	Annual	\$42,530	\$61,650	\$93,640
Illinois	Hourly	\$22.67	\$30.25	\$38.22
	Annual	\$47,150	\$62,920	\$79,500

State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2020	2030		
Dietitians and Nutritionists	73,000	80,800	11%	5,900
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2018	2028		
Dietitians and Nutritionists	2,760	2,870	+4%	190

¹Job Openings refers to the average annual job openings due to growth and net replacement.

Professional Organizations

American Dietetic Association (eatright.org)

References

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Dietitians and Nutritionists (<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dietitians-and-nutritionists.htm>)

O*NET OnLine (<http://online.onetcenter.org/link/summary/29-1031.00>)

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