What is Dietetics?

Dietetics is the study of diet and nutrition in relation to health and disease. Health professionals who practice dietetics in Ontario are registered with the College of Dietitians of Ontario (CDO) and are called Registered Dietitians (RDs). There are approximately 2700 RDs in Ontario. RDs work in a variety of settings, most commonly hospitals (41%), chronic care/long-term-care facilities/group homes (15%), private practice and counseling (10%) and public health (9%). Less common worksites are community health centres, business settings, university/community college, Community Care Access Centre/home care and government.

Across all areas of dietetics, RDs have three things in common. They have: (1) graduated from a program accredited by Dietitians of Canada, such as the University of Guelph’s Applied Human Nutrition program; (2) completed a dietetic internship or obtained necessary competencies via another route, such as the University of Guelph’s Masters of Applied Nutrition program or the University of Western Ontario (Brescia)’s Master of Science in Foods and Nutrition (Internship Stream); and (3) successfully completed the Canadian Dietetic Registration Examination.

The job opportunities in dietetics are as varied as the people who work in the field. Below is a breakdown of the most common employment areas in dietetics.

I am interested in working as a clinical dietitian. Can you tell me more?

First, you are in good company. 42% of dietitians registered with CDO work in clinical practice, in hospitals, other healthcare facilities, and in the community, providing medical nutrition therapy to individuals who are at risk or already have a variety of health conditions. Medical nutrition therapy involves assessing the patient’s condition, providing nutrition diagnoses, devising individual goals and implementing a care and monitoring plan. Clinical dietitians may also work with families and conduct group education classes for patients, families and other healthcare workers. Dietitians increasingly work outside of hospitals and long-term care facilities, in a range of specialized community programs, such as the Community Care Access programs, Home Care, Canada Prenatal Program and Diabetes Education Centres.

Clinical dietitians often work as part of health care teams that may include physicians, registered nurses, social workers, pharmacists, physical therapists, speech therapists, or occupational therapists, depending on the particular setting.

In larger centres, clinical dietitians may specialize in one or more areas of nutrition, which may include renal diseases, gastroenterology, oncology, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, ICU, etc. They may also specialize in women’s health or particular stages of the lifespan, such as gerontology or pediatrics.

In smaller rural or remote communities, dietitians may provide “regional” or “community” services including a wide range and mix of clinical, administrative or community based services, which vary, depending on the organization of provincial health services and the needs of the local community.
I am interested in working in education and research. What employment options do I have?

17% of RDs in Ontario work in education and research, in academia, as sessional or full-time faculty and/or in hospitals, as internship coordinators. Research dietitians typically hold at minimum a MSc; most hold PhDs. There is currently a shortage of RD/PhDs across North America.

Some hospitals encourage clinical dietitians to also engage in practice-based research. St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto is one example.

What about policy development and program planning?

12% of RDs in Ontario work primarily on policy development and program planning. These RDs coordinate nutritional programs and plan nutrition related programming in a number of agencies and organizations, including non-profit organizations and hospitals. For example, Public Health Nutritionists working in public health departments may work with others on plans for an entire community. Dietitians working in policy development, especially at a government level, usually have a post-graduate degree and significant prior work experience. A MSc is required to become a Public Health Nutritionist in Ontario and, at present, individuals must apply to the Ministry of Health promotion to be credentialed as a Public Health Nutritionist.

Many dietitians undertake some program planning as one feature of their jobs. Dietitians working in Ontario Community Health Centres may plan both community-wide and individual services for their designated high risk populations. Clinical managers in hospitals develop and manage plans to provide counselling services. Private practice dietitians may develop workplace wellness programs for companies.

I am interested in the food and nutrition management aspect of dietetics. What can you tell me about this area?

8% of RDs in Ontario work in food and nutrition management as their primary focus. Food service dietitians or managers are responsible for large-scale food planning and service. They coordinate, assess and plan food service processes in hospitals and other health care facilities, school food service programs, universities, prisons, large businesses, cafeterias and restaurants. Their primary activity is ensuring that food is safe, nutritious and within budgeted costs. These RDs may also perform audits of their departments, train food service workers and use marketing skills to launch new menus and various programs within their institution. They direct and manage the operational and nutrition services staffs such as kitchen staff, delivery staff and dietary assistants/aides.

Are there any other areas of dietetics you can tell me about?

Yes and yes! The remaining 20% or so of RDs work in: clinical nutrition management (as Directors in hospitals, overseeing clinical dietitians), in sales and marketing (e.g., for companies, such as Nestle, Abbott and Mead Johnson, or for agencies such as the Dairy Farmers of Canada, Egg Marketing Board,
etc.) and others are employed by various branches within Health Canada or are consulting dietitians in private practice.

**How can I find out more information about becoming an RD?**

A great way to stay informed about educational and job opportunities is to join Dietitians of Canada as a student member. Be sure to also attend the yearly Internship Forum held in Toronto every fall (contact your AHNSA for more info on dates and transportation). This is an invaluable opportunity to meet internship directors and current interns.