

COMMUNITY DIETITIANS

Trusted Food and Nutrition Experts

**Role Paper of the Dietitians of Canada
Community Dietitians in Health Centres Network
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This report is published by Dietitians of Canada and the DC Community Dietitians in Health Centres Network. Dietitians of Canada (DC) is the professional association representing 5000 dietitians in Canada. Dietitians of Canada speaks out on food and nutrition matters important to the health and well-being of Canadians. Members of DC Community Dietitians in Health Centres Network have collaborated to bring information forward to inform decision makers about the Community Dietitian's role on health care teams.

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What is a Dietitian?

Registered Dietitians are:

- Well educated in the science of food and human nutrition
- Able to combine knowledge of nutrition with knowledge from other areas such as health and social sciences, education, communication and management
- Responsible for ongoing professional development to ensure that they provide safe, ethical, and high quality services
- Trained to apply their knowledge of food and nutrition in a range of settings and to build respectful relationships with their clients

The minimum requirements to become a dietitian are as follows:

- A bachelor's degree with major credits in Foods and Nutrition from a university offering a Dietitians of Canada Accredited Dietetic Education Program.
- Completion of an accredited dietetic education program (or equivalent)
- Completion of an accredited practicum experience (or equivalent). This may include a post-degree internship, an integrated undergraduate program or a Combined Masters Practicum program.
- Successful completion of an exam to assess competence to practice in Canada

Registered Dietitians are Trusted Nutrition Experts

Registered Dietitians are accountable to the public and to their provincial regulatory body for their conduct, the quality of their care and the nutrition services they provide. They also adhere to nationally established standards of practice. The public can trust that registered dietitians are highly qualified and dedicated to a client-centred approach.

Community Dietitians

Community Dietitians are Registered Dietitians. Distinct from Public Health Dietitians/Nutritionists, Community Dietitians work in a variety of settings such as Community Health Centres, resource centres, social service agencies and recreation centres. They play a vital role in both community based health promotion programs and primary health care services. They are experts in applied human nutrition with a focus on helping people in the community meet their food and nutrition needs, in health or disease, at all stages of the life cycle. Each Community Dietitian brings a broad array of skills which they adapt to meet the needs of the workplace and the community to ensure a continuum of services. They engage in a wide range of activities which may include, but are not limited to:

- Nutrition education
- Individual and community needs assessments
- Program planning
- Community development
- Advocacy
- Networking
- Social marketing
- Resource Development
- Management activities
- Consultation
- Nutrition counselling
- Training of peer support workers
- Health care team participation
- Practice-based research and program evaluation

Working with an interdisciplinary health care team and partnering with other community leaders, services, and groups are fundamental to the work of Community Dietitians. These partnerships help to provide the most comprehensive and thorough health care services to the community.

Leaders in Primary Health Care

It is widely recognized that there is a need to place greater value on primary health care and health promotion in Canada (1). The World Health Organization defines Primary Health Care as: *“...health care made universally accessible to individuals and families in the community by the means acceptable to them, through their full participation and at a cost that the community and country can afford... It is the first level of contact of individuals, the family and community with the national health care system, bringing health care as close as possible to where people live and work and constitutes the first element of a continuing health care process... Primary Health Care addresses the main health problems in the community, providing promotive, preventive, curative, supportive and rehabilitative services accordingly”* (1).

Primary health care services are organized in a variety of ways in Canada. Community Health Centres and their Quebec counterpart, Centre Local de Services Communautaires are one organizational model. Dietitians working in community health centre organizations provide a range of services as will be described in more detail on following pages. For further details on the role of the dietitian in Primary Health Care refer to the Dietitians of Canada 2001 role paper available online at: http://www.dietitians.ca/news/downloads/role_of_RD_in_PHC.pdf

Nutrition is a key factor in promoting and maintaining health. Community Dietitians play an important leadership role in primary health care through health promotion, disease prevention, treatment, support, and rehabilitation activities. With their broad and diverse training, Community Dietitians bring many valuable skills and perspectives to primary health care. Some examples/activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Engaging in ongoing health promotion and illness prevention strategies
- Providing practical nutrition information to support the health of people throughout the life cycle
- Promoting behaviour change related to food choices and eating behaviours
- Counselling individuals on specific nutrition issues and support strategies to address nutrition-related illnesses
- Promoting client independence in health decision-making and build capacity for clients to improve their health
- Working with the health care team to provide clients with comprehensive health care
- Assessing and responding to the food and nutrition related health needs of the community
- Fostering partnerships with a range of sectors to address the many factors that affect nutrition and health
- Working with communities to identify capacities and assist community skill-building, health advocacy and social action
- Educating – acting as a nutrition resource with team members as well as in a preceptor role with dietetic interns.

The strategies that Community Dietitians use in health promotion, disease prevention and treatment are well recognized as important in improving health outcomes and reducing the overall costs of health care. Community Dietitians contribute to the enhancement and maintenance of the quality of life of community members (1).

Poverty, Education, Isolation and Employment: Determinants of Health

A variety of factors impact on health, especially employment, education, income level, isolation and social exclusion. Other factors include social status, personal health and coping skills, biology and genetics, health services, gender, physical environment, healthy child development, culture, and working conditions. Collectively, these are known as the determinants of health. These determinants are inter-related and their complex interactions have a much greater impact on health than any one factor (1,2).

Community Dietitians recognize the factors that impact on health and use a range of strategies to address them. A key strategy is to link with other sectors such as schools, childcare facilities, housing, social services, public health, environmental groups, faith-based groups, and other non-governmental and volunteer organizations to provide a more comprehensive approach. They build partnerships with communities, groups and individuals to plan the best approach to overcome barriers to achieving health and good nutrition. Along with community members, dietitians identify capacities, support community skill-building, advocate for health, and support social action (1). Ultimately, dietitians work to promote and build the capacity for the nutritional and overall health of clients and the community.

Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

Nutrition is important in promoting and maintaining health. Community Dietitians are trained to understand the relationship between food and health throughout the life cycle and are able to communicate this relationship to health care providers, educators, policy makers, and the community (3). A lifetime of poor nutrition can play an important role in the onset of chronic diseases. The food we eat can affect risk factors for heart disease such as blood cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and body weight. Diet is also related to approximately 20% of all cancer-related deaths (4). Chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and osteoporosis can have long term and costly outcomes that can be measured in death and disability, reduced quality of life, health care costs and lost productivity (5, 6).

Community Dietitians engage in many health promotion activities to encourage healthy eating to reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Some examples/activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Participating in the development of healthy public policies that impact on access to healthy foods
- Advocating for community food security to ensure that people are able to get the healthy foods they need in an environmentally sustainable way
- Collaborating with health professionals and community workers to provide consistent nutrition messages (e.g., to consume adequate vegetables and fruit, fibre, calcium and vitamin D, etc.)
- Creating supportive environments for healthy eating practices through work with community partners
- Working with schools and childcare facilities to develop healthy eating guidelines
- Promoting healthy eating with seniors and consult with seniors' agencies to support appropriate healthy eating practices (e.g., conglomerate meals, "cooking for one or two" classes, etc.)
- Supporting community action for nutrition issues (e.g., work to save community gardens)
- Linking with local, provincial and national disease associations to enhance awareness and prevention activities

They also work with individuals and groups of all ages to develop personal skills. Some examples/activities include, but are not limited to:

- Developing nutrition care plans for specific therapeutic needs.
- Educating people in the management of food allergies and food sensitivities
- Providing support to individuals to assist them in understanding healthy eating and making changes that suit their needs
- Promoting ways to eat well on a budget and with limited time for food preparation
- Providing healthy cooking classes and cooking demonstrations
- Promoting pleasure and enjoyment of healthy eating

The goals of nutrition promotion in disease prevention are to promote and maintain the health of people in their communities, to improve quality of life, to reduce the incidence and severity of preventable diseases such as cancer and heart disease, and to reduce overall health care costs (7).

Food Security

A current definition of “Community Food Security” as developed by the Ontario Public Health Association Food Security Work Group (2002) is: “*Community food security is a strategy for ensuring secure access to adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food for everyone, produced in an environmentally sustainable way, and provided in a manner that promotes human dignity... Community Food Security features cooperation among all contributors in a local/regional food system including growers and producers, citizen groups, community agencies, governmental organizations, businesses, academic researchers and environmental advocates...*”(8)

This definition recognizes everyone’s right to food to support life and the need for optimal nutrition to prevent disease (8). It emphasizes the fact that foods have important personal, spiritual and cultural meanings. Initial strategies to address food insecurity were either educational or charitable but with the recognition of the impact of the determinants of health, the concept of ‘Food Security’ has evolved (8). Factors such as social isolation, poverty, access to healthy, culturally appropriate food, food preparation and literacy skills are all related to the ability to get the food one needs (8).

The number of people in Canada who experience food shortages and hunger has been growing since the 1980s and is widely recognized as a health issue (8). A recent report showed that 10% of Canadians were living in food insecure households (9). People most likely to be food insecure included: those with low-incomes or on social assistance, tenants, single parent families (especially single mothers), children, and Aboriginal people (9). These groups were also more likely to have other problems such as poor or fair health, multiple chronic conditions, obesity, distress and depression (9). Poor nutrition also impacts on learning as inadequately nourished children score lower on vocabulary, reading, comprehension, arithmetic and general knowledge tests and have poorer psychosocial outcomes (10).

Community Dietitians contribute to community food security in a multitude of ways. Community Dietitians have the skills and abilities to:

- Perform community food security needs assessments
- Organize community development and mobilization on food access issues
- Communicate food security issues to the media and decision makers
- Work on food councils and local food security coalitions
- Develop healthy food-related policies
- Advocate for clients on social assistance to enhance access to food, food preparation facilities, and funding for special diets
- Develop, deliver, and evaluate programs such as community kitchens, community gardens, peer-led cooking programs, school-based meal programs, and food buying clubs (e.g. the Good Food Box)
- Support and promote local food production
- Offer education on healthy eating on a low budget to individuals and groups

Food security is an issue that impacts all aspects of health promotion and the nutritional management of disease.

Consumer Education

Many Canadians are confused about what they should eat to achieve and maintain health and feel that they are not eating as well as they could be (5). With competing interests and a rapidly growing body of nutrition knowledge, public information is often contradictory. Consumers say they lack sufficient knowledge and skills to assess the merits of certain claims and recommended practices (11). Research on Dietitians of Canada's National Nutrition Month campaigns has indicated that consumers identify dietitians as the most credible source of nutrition information (5).

Community Dietitians help people in their community make informed decisions about healthy eating for better living through the following activities. They:

- Use social marketing strategies in nutrition promotion
- Deliver clear and current nutrition messages to reduce confusion in an environment of multiple and often conflicting nutrition findings
- Work with the media to bring nutrition information to consumers; activities include writing newspaper articles, giving radio and television interviews and cooking demonstrations
- Teach consumers how to read nutrition labels to help them improve food selection
- Provide supermarket tours and food purchasing education
- Develop nutrition education programs for a variety of ages that are interactive and practical such as classes on healthy eating, food preparation, food preservation, eating on the go, healthy snacks and beverage choices, etc.
- Adapt programs and other activities to meet the learning styles and needs of individuals and groups (e.g., give advice that recognizes the time constraints that impact food purchasing and preparation)
- Work with diverse cultures to educate Canadians about other cultures and help other cultures learn about Canadian foods (e.g., cooking demonstrations where new immigrants share foods and experiences)
- Develop resources and tools that are culturally relevant and at literacy levels suitable for the target population

Healthy Growth and Development

Community Dietitians play a key role in the design, delivery and evaluation of prenatal and early childhood nutrition services. Community Dietitians are often important contributors to programs such as Health Canada's Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP), Alberta's Health for Two program and Ontario's Early Years program.

Through a community development approach, prenatal nutrition programs aim to reduce the incidence of unhealthy birth weights, improve the nutritional health of both infant and mother and encourage breastfeeding. Community Dietitians can provide services such as nutrition counselling, support, education, referral, counselling on health and lifestyle issues, and food supplementation. The programs are usually for higher risk pregnant women (those living in poverty, teens, or women living in isolation or with poor access to services). Other client groups include women with drug or alcohol addictions, women who live with violence, women with gestational diabetes, Aboriginal women, and immigrant and/or refugee women.

Many community nutrition programs also focus on children's early years, working with groups similar to those found in prenatal programs and with emphasis on supporting young families in meeting their food and nutrition needs. Programs work to meet the unique needs of each community and its children.

Community Dietitians promote healthy growth and development in children by working with pregnant women, new mothers, families and caregivers in many ways. They:

- Develop, provide and evaluate programs to support good nutrition during and after pregnancy
- Encourage healthy eating and healthy weight gain for a healthy pregnancy
- Provide support for breastfeeding with referral to other health professionals and community supports such as lactation consultants where appropriate
- Offer advice on when and how to introduce solid foods to infants
- Provide sessions on making baby foods
- Inform caregivers about age-appropriate foods and eating behaviours for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers
- Teach caregivers practical skills such as how to make low-cost, easy to prepare family meals
- Advocate for access to healthy, adequate and affordable foods for families
- Facilitate social and cultural networks to decrease social isolation of single and new immigrant mothers
- Develop programs and resources appropriate for culturally diverse groups, recent immigrants, young mothers, and participants from a range of education and economic backgrounds

Healthy Weights

Community Dietitians support the importance of healthy eating, physical activity and positive self esteem as the three components of achieving and maintaining a healthy weight (which reflects Health Canada's *VITALITY* approach of "Enjoy eating well, being active and feeling good about yourself") (12).

Overweight and obesity contribute to chronic diseases and impact quality of life (13). It has been suggested that obesity and preoccupation with weight contribute to high health care costs (14). The prevalence of obesity in Canada has been increasing at a rapid rate. The reasons for this increase in obesity rates are multi-factorial and represent a complex interaction between genetics and social and environmental changes.

Weight loss strategies that focus on restrictive diets have had little, if any, long term success. Experts in the field of healthy weights, who focus on eating disorders and obesity, are working toward a more integrated approach that recognizes the interrelationship between healthy eating, physical activity, self-esteem, stress and psychosocial factors (13).

Community Dietitians work with individuals, groups and communities to encourage healthy weights. They promote supportive environments and healthy attitudes toward weight. For example, they:

- Provide counselling for healthy eating, healthy weights, body image and self-esteem to individuals and groups of all ages and cultures
- Promote a non-dieting approach to weight management
- Communicate the lack of success and the risks of restrictive fad diets
- Work with clients to develop healthy weight goals
- Refer clients to other health professionals, counselling, and community support groups as appropriate
- Provide information and support to health care providers on weight issues
- Work with caregivers, childcare providers and schools to promote healthy eating behaviours and attitudes in infants and children (e.g., school initiatives like healthy snack programs that encourage nutritious food choices)
- Support parents and caregivers to help them model healthy eating and physical activity
- Advocate for policies to increase access to healthy foods with School Boards and Food Councils

Community Dietitians approach weight-related issues with sensitivity, empathy and creativity with the aim of improving the health and overall quality of life of people affected by overweight, obesity and weight preoccupation.

Disease Management - Diabetes

Community Dietitians are involved in disease management where diet plays a role. Diabetes is one of these diseases. Diabetes is a significant health problem in Canada (15). As many as one third of all cases of diabetes in Canada are undiagnosed. There may be as many as 1.7 million Canadians with diabetes (15).

Diabetes can impact the psychosocial well-being and quality of life of those with the disease (16). The continuous need to monitor food intake, take medication, monitor blood glucose, and plan for activities that may affect diabetes control can put a strain on daily life (15). Diabetes can also result in long term damage that can affect the cardiovascular system, eyes, kidneys, and nerves and result in disability or premature death (15).

Studies have shown that dietitians can have a positive impact on health outcomes for people with diabetes (7). Registered Dietitians are able to identify and promote diet-related behaviours associated with improved blood glucose control which can reduce the risk of diabetes complications (7).

Community Dietitians provide an important service to the members of their community who are newly diagnosed or living with diabetes. A dietitian's assessment of individuals with diabetes is comprehensive; it includes usual eating habits, medical history, laboratory information, physical activity history, health beliefs, motivation, psychosocial issues, and economic and education level. Dietitians provide individuals with knowledge, skills and supports helpful in the management of the disease. They:

- Develop and implement diabetes education programs
- Research and evaluate the effectiveness of diabetes intervention strategies
- Adapt diabetes programs to make them culturally sensitive
- Provide individual diabetic counselling
- Offer group education sessions
- Facilitate the development and maintenance of diabetes networks and social support systems
- Address issues of food security for people with diabetes
- Develop tools and resources to assist with the self-management of diabetes
- Refer clients with diabetes to appropriate community, social and health-related supports

Some dietitians who work in diabetes care have obtained additional knowledge and skills through certificate programs such as the *Certified Diabetes Educators (CDE)* available through the Canadian Diabetes Educator Certification Board of the Canadian Diabetes Association.

Aboriginal Health

Aboriginal peoples have distinct nutrition related concerns. In particular, diabetes has been identified as an important health problem to most First Nations people (including the Métis) but has not yet been identified as a concern among the Inuit (16). Research in Canada suggests that there is a three to five times greater prevalence of diabetes in Aboriginal people, with women having a greater risk than men, and that current rates are expected to increase (15, 16). In the last half century, obesity has also become of increasing concern in many Aboriginal populations (16).

Within Aboriginal communities a decrease in the availability and consumption of traditional food items has become common (16). Individuals and their families may be at various stages of acculturation such as working to maintain their traditional foods, integrating mainstream and other culturally diverse foods, or relearning about traditional foods and ways of eating. Aboriginal people have also been identified as a population that is more vulnerable to food insecurity (9).

Many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Community Dietitians work with First Nations people to address their culturally specific food and nutrition needs. For example they:

- Promote healthy eating and healthy weights using a holistic approach that treats the whole person including physical, mental, social, spiritual and emotional factors
- Integrate traditional values and foods into nutrition services
- Advocate for community access to adequate, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods
- Provide education about food purchasing and preparation with a focus on both traditional and market foods
- Use consumer education strategies that employ cultural learning styles
- Work with families and community groups to promote healthy prenatal and early childhood nutrition
- Offer individual and group counselling for diabetes, obesity and other nutrition related diseases

Community Dietitians who work with Aboriginal people aim to have a thorough understanding of, and sensitivity to, their particular food and nutrition issues. They have an awareness of, and respect for, their history, culture, traditional medicines, food preferences, communication and learning styles, and the political, social and economic factors that impact their lives. They must also strive to understand how Aboriginal people interpret their illness experience and to respect their system of thought (16).

Community Dietitians work in collaboration with Aboriginal people, the Chief and Council and other local Aboriginal organizations to determine the food and nutrition needs of the community. They link with local, provincial and national Aboriginal and First Nation health groups to provide the most comprehensive, current and culturally appropriate information and care.

Who are our Partners?

Community Dietitians recognize the value and necessity of developing strong partnerships with a variety of sectors to deliver the most comprehensive health care. Dietitians are valuable team players, facilitators and can act to develop and support strong community networks. The following list is extensive but is not exhaustive as dietitians continue to develop and foster new partnerships to meet the food, nutrition and health needs of their communities

Sectors that dietitians often partner with to address community nutrition concerns:	Individuals that dietitians partner with within these sectors include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health agencies such as community health centres, public health units and hospitals • Professional dietetic practice groups and networks • Social service agencies • Cultural community groups • Family support services • Workplaces • Environmental groups • Recreation departments • Childcare facilities and schools • School advisory boards and parent councils • Colleges, universities and other academic institutions • Service clubs • Gardening networks • Farmers markets • Food policy councils • Anti-poverty groups • Social planning councils • Emergency food providers • Congregate meal programs • Seniors' centres • Housing agencies • Faith-based community groups • Other non-government organizations • Government agencies • Retail food outlets and restaurants • Food industry • Chambers of commerce • Local businesses • School Feeding Programs • School Milk Programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other health care professionals • Health promotion workers • Physical activity promoters • Volunteers • Employers • Social workers • Cultural leaders • Community development workers • Community food workers • Local farmers • Lactation consultants • Early childhood educators • Teachers and school administrators • Municipal, provincial and federal politicians

Community Dietitians are a Community Asset

Community Dietitians bring many skills to the communities and agencies where they work. They are important contributors to the overall achievement of the health mandate of the organization and are a key member of the multi-disciplinary health care team. Community Dietitians are also involved in management, administration, teaching professionals-in-training, research and evaluation (1).

Many dietitians take a leadership role in community health agencies. As skilled team players, they establish strategic directions, define program priorities, facilitate group discussions, monitor programs and budgets, and manage staff. Highly trained in food and nutrition, they are also experienced in needs assessment, program planning, evaluation and communication, which make them indispensable as collaborators in primary health care and many community health activities.

Keenly aware of the important role of the determinants of health in overall health outcomes, dietitians are considerate of the physical, mental, spiritual, social, political and emotional factors that impact health and nutrition. They provide accessible care to the whole community by offering outreach services in drop-in centres, shelters, etc. Community Dietitians take a holistic approach to the nutritional health of individuals and communities.

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**The Community Dietitians in Health Centres Network is a national group made up of members of Dietitians of Canada who have an interest in community nutrition.*

The CDHC Network has three goals:

- 1) Network and provide support among Community Dietitians who are employed in a health centre setting.*
- 2) Plan and participate in continuing education that addresses our specific needs and interests.*
- 3) Promote and advocate the role of the Registered Dietitian as the nutrition expert in both primary care and health promotion.*

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