



The Association
of UK Dietitians

Dietitian, Nutritionist, Nutritional Therapist or Diet Expert?

A comprehensive guide to roles and functions.



Choosing the right person to seek help and advice from can sometimes be a confusing task. Many people claim to be experts in nutrition yet have very limited knowledge and offer no protection to the public.

This useful leaflet explains the differences between the roles and functions of dietitians, nutritionists and nutritional therapists.



Dietitians are the only nutrition professionals to be regulated by law, and are governed by an ethical code to ensure that they always work to the highest standard.

Dietitians

Registered Dietitians (RDs) are the only qualified health professionals that assess, diagnose and treat dietary and nutritional problems at an individual and wider public health level. They work with both healthy and sick people. Uniquely, dietitians use the most up-to-date public health and scientific research on food, health and disease which they translate into practical guidance to enable people to make appropriate lifestyle and food choices.

Dietitians are the only nutrition professionals to be regulated by law, and are governed by an ethical code to ensure that they always work to the highest standard. Dietitians work in the NHS, private practice, industry, education, research, sport, media, public relations, publishing, government and Non Government Organisations (NGOs). Dietitians advise and influence food and health policy across the spectrum from government, to local communities and individuals.

Is their title protected by law?

Yes - only those registered with the statutory regulator, the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) can use the title of Dietitian/Registered Dietitian (RD).

What qualifications do they have?

Minimum requirement is a BSc Hons in Dietetics, or a related science degree with a postgraduate diploma or higher degree in Dietetics.

Dietitians

Dietetic courses are structured to include biochemistry, physiology, applied sciences and research methods which underpin nutrition and dietetics. These are complemented by social and behavioural sciences and the theories of communication to support the development of skills required for professional dietetic practice.

All courses require a period of supervised practice including NHS settings, where an individual must demonstrate clinical and professional competence before being eligible to apply for registration.

The British Dietetic Association is the professional body and Trade Union for dietitians and is also responsible for designing the curriculum for the profession.

Courses must be approved by the HCPC and demonstrate that graduates meet the Standards of Proficiency for Dietetics.

Who are they regulated and quality assured by?

The HCPC's role is to protect the public. It is an independent, UK-wide health regulator. It currently sets standards of professional training, performance and conduct for 14 professions. The HCPC keeps a current register of health professionals who meet its standards and takes action if registered health professionals fall below those standards. Registered professionals must keep up-to-date through compulsory Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

If an individual is not happy with treatment they are given, or if they are worried about the behaviour or health of a dietitian, they can approach the HCPC who will investigate and take action.

How can I check that my dietitian is registered?

By checking the HCPC online register - www.hcpc-uk.org

Where do they work?

Dietitians work in the NHS and in private clinics. They work with healthy and sick people in a variety of settings. Dietitians can work in the food industry, workplace, catering, education, sport and the media. Other care pathways they work in include mental health, learning disabilities, community, acute settings and public health.

They often work as integral members of multi-disciplinary teams to treat complex clinical conditions such as diabetes, food allergy and intolerance, IBS syndrome, eating disorders, chronic fatigue, malnutrition, kidney failure and bowel disorders. They provide advice to caterers to ensure the nutritional care of all clients in NHS and other care settings such as nursing homes, they also plan and implement public health programmes to promote health and prevent nutrition related diseases. A key role of a dietitian is to train and educate other health and social care workers.

They also advise on diet to avoid the side effects and interactions between medications.

What type of treatments do they offer?

Dietitians interpret the science of nutrition to improve health and treat diseases and conditions by educating and giving practical advice to clients, patients, carers and colleagues. They advise and help to maintain nutritional status when individuals want to trial dietary interventions such as exclusion diets, nutritional supplementation or dietary interventions in areas such as autism for which evidence is still emerging.

Dietitians

They use recognised methodologies to critically appraise the evidence base which includes all forms of evidence and research to inform their advice.

They cannot offer advice where there would be personal financial benefit.

Dietitians are legally able to supply and administer some prescription only medicines e.g. insulin, phosphate binders and pancreatic enzymes, through Trusts/Health Boards. They can also adjust this medication. Much of their work is spent advising/counselling other medical staff as to the best course of action in regard to an individual's nutritional status.

What products do they use and can they order on drug charts?

Dietitians are able to manage the whole system from advice and recommendation to an individual's access to all NHS approved borderline substances (ACBS) nutritional products and supplements, with or without prescription.

Nutritionists

Nutritionists work in different roles including public health, health improvement, health policy, local and national government, in the private sector, Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and in education and research.

Nutritionists are qualified to provide information about food and healthy eating.

Many employers of nutritionists in all sectors will only consider recruiting Registered Nutritionists – or Registered Dietitians.

Is their title protected by law?

No – anyone can call themselves a nutritionist, however only registrants with the UK Voluntary Register of Nutritionists (UKVRN) can call themselves a Registered Nutritionist (RNutrs). RNutrs are not permitted by law to call themselves dietitians.

What qualifications do they have?

There are many degree courses available in nutrition. Courses that have applied and met strict standards of professional education in nutrition are accredited by the Association for Nutrition (AfN) and graduates from these courses have direct entry onto the voluntary register. It is not a legal requirement for a nutritionist to be registered with the UKVRN, which is run by the Association for Nutrition (AfN).

Nutritionists

A nutritionist who is not registered with the UKVRN may not have met or be able to meet the AfN's recognised standards and competencies in underpinning knowledge and professional skills.

Who are they regulated and quality assured by?

Nutritionists are not required to be registered in order to work in the UK. Many nutritionists belong to the voluntary self regulated professional register, UKVRN, held at present by the AfN and use the title Registered Nutritionist.

Registrants are expected to keep up-to-date through Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

How can I check that my nutritionist is registered?

By using the 'Search the Register' function on the AfN website **www.associationfornutrition.org**

Where do they work?

Nutritionists work in all non-clinical settings such as in Government, food industry, research, teaching, sports and exercise industries, international work in developing countries, media and communications, animal nutrition and NGOs.

There are some nutritionists employed within the NHS working alongside Registered Dietitians. Nutritionists often work freelance as consultants.

Nutritionists work with people who are well, without any known existing medical conditions, to prevent disease.

They cannot work with acutely ill hospitalised patients or those living in the community requiring therapeutic interventions without supervision from a dietitian.

What type of treatments do they offer?

Nutritionists are qualified to provide information about food and healthy eating, but not about special diets for medical conditions.

What products do they use and can they prescribe on drug charts?

A nutritionist registered with the AfN may recommend NHS approved supplements such as folic acid. They are not able to prescribe on drug charts.

Non-Registered Nutritionists may often suggest supplements that are not NHS approved.

Nutritional Therapists and Diet Experts

Nutritional therapists encompass the use of recommendations for diet and lifestyle in order to alleviate or prevent ailments, often based on complementary 'medicine' recommendations not recognised as valid treatment in conventional medicine. These recommendations may include guidance on detoxification, colonic irrigation, the avoidance of ingestion or inhalation of 'toxins' or 'allergens' and the use of supplementary nutrients.

Is their title protected by law?

No - anyone can call themselves a Nutritionist, a Nutritional Therapist, a Clinical Nutritionist or a Diet Expert. They are not permitted by law to call themselves dietitians.

What qualifications do they have?

Some training is provided through the Institute of Optimum Nutrition and other informal routes. 'Foundation Degree' status can be awarded to courses considered of sufficient level. This is not a degree qualification but an accredited qualification that may mean candidates satisfy entry conditions to start a recognised degree in Nutrition. Nutritional therapy foundation degrees are not recognised by universities for candidates wishing to take a Dietetic degree.

Nutritional therapists are not eligible to register with either UK Voluntary Register of Nutritionists (UKVRN) or the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC).

Nutritional Therapists

Who are they regulated and quality assured by?

Voluntary regulation is possible but not compulsory, through the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC). This is self-regulated rather than independently regulated.

How can I check that my Nutritional Therapist is registered?

Nutritional therapists are not eligible to register with either UK Voluntary Register of Nutritionists (UKVRN) or the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC). Nutritional therapists are able to register with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council though this is not compulsory. This may be checked at www.cnhc.org.uk/pages/index.cfm

Where do they work?

Nutritional therapists see individuals on a private basis who wish to consider alternative/complementary medicine.

What type of treatments do they offer?

Nutritional therapists use treatments such as high dose vitamins, detox, and food avoidance for which there is little robust scientific evidence.

They work on the belief that the body has underlying nutritional and biochemical imbalances that lead to poor health including mental health problems.

They do not use the evidence in a robust fashion and advice is most often based on personal opinion or belief.

What products do they use?

Nutritional therapists use commercial (non-NHS approved) dietary supplements including mega doses of vitamins and minerals, and commercial (not NHS approved) allergy testing.

Suggested products have to be bought. Under their voluntary register, Nutritional therapists are allowed to sell supplements to their clients.

Diet Experts

There exist many other individuals who style themselves as 'diet experts' or 'nutrition experts' sometimes with many letters after their name. Some may have no more qualifications than an interest in food. This is largely a self-regulated industry where anyone can set up and practice, meaning there is no real protection for consumers.

It is advisable to ask anyone who you are considering taking advice from about their background and qualifications and satisfy yourself that they are appropriately qualified and regulated or discuss with your GP, consultant or health visitor.

How to find a Registered Dietitian

Whether you consult a Registered Dietitian or a registered nutritionist will depend on the kind of advice you want.

You can find a registered dietitian:

- by contacting your local hospital or GP surgery
- by searching for a freelance dietitian on the Dietitians Unlimited website, which is run by the Freelance Dietitians Group of the British Dietetic Association (BDA)
- through the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)

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