The Role of a Clinical RD
A Fact Sheet for Health Professionals

The purpose of this fact sheet is to discuss the roles and scope of practice of a clinical dietitian and to discuss their responsibilities, capabilities and skills in a hospital setting.

What does a clinical RD do?

While RDs work in a variety of settings, clinical RDs typically work in a hospital or acute care setting. In these settings, the role of an RD is to monitor, assess, and optimize nutritional status based on a patient’s current medical condition, past medical history, and current intake.

An RD accomplishes this by using the Nutrition Care Process, a framework that guides critical thinking and decision making so that the RD can individualize care using peer-reviewed research to support evidence-based practice. The Nutrition Care Process includes:

- **Assessment**: food- and nutrition-related history, medical history, biochemical data, anthropometric measurements, nutrition-focused physical findings, beliefs and attitudes
- **Diagnosis**: based on the assessment, the RD selects a standardized nutrition diagnosis that the RD is responsible for treating independently
- **Intervention**: the RD selects an intervention that is targeted to address the etiology of the diagnosis, taking into account the unique needs of the patient
- **Monitoring/Evaluation**: the RD monitors the patient’s signs and symptoms to determine if the nutrition diagnosis is resolved or improved

For more information on the Nutrition Care Process, visit:
http://www.eatrightpro.org/resources/practice/nutrition-care-process

Minimum Qualifications of an RD

Minimum of a Baccalaureate degree granted by a U.S. regionally accredited college/university

Completion of an ACEND accredited Didactic Program in Dietetics

Minimum of 1200 hours of supervised practice within an Accredited Dietetic Internship Program or Coordinated Program

Successfully passing the registration examination for dietitians

Many RDs already have an MS, MPH, or PhD to support their practice as a clinical or community-based health care provider. By 2024, all practicing RDs will be required to have a master’s degree to be eligible to take the registration exam.
How can an RD help you and your patients?

**Nutrition Support**

- Recommend appropriate diet orders
- Write and modify tube feed orders
- Write and modify total parenteral nutrition (TPN) orders
- Provide fluid recommendations
- Offer appropriate oral supplements to ensure patients meet calorie and protein goals

**Interdisciplinary Teamwork**

- Interview patients for diet and weight history
- Order lab tests and recommend appropriate vitamin and mineral supplements
- Identify food and drug nutrient interactions
- Monitor electrolytes and recommend replenishments as needed
- Respond to consults and questions from doctors, nurse practitioners, surgeons, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, and other members of the healthcare team
- Consult on transplant candidates and offer pre- and post-transplant nutrition guidelines
- Collaborate with speech language pathologists to determine appropriate diets or texture modifications for patients with swallowing difficulties
- Participate in multidisciplinary rounds
- Document patients who meet criteria for malnutrition
- Coordinate nutrition discharge plans
- Communicate with Dietetic Technicians, Registered (DTRs) and call center to ensure patients are receiving the correct meals and supplements

**Nutrition Education**

- Provide inpatient education to patients who have just undergone surgical procedures like gastric bypass, ileostomies, colostomies, and Whipples
- Provide education related to kidney disease, diabetes, congestive heart failure, diabetes, and more
- Refer patients to outpatient RDs for counseling in areas like obesity, weight management, and diabetes
- Answer patient questions related to health and disease states
- Provide age- and culture-specific recommendations on food choices and diet

**Pediatrics**

- Assess and monitor growth
- Counsel parents on age-appropriate feeding recommendations
- Provide comprehensive nutrition guidance for children with congenital or genetic disorders including cystic fibrosis, Type 1 diabetes, and inborn errors of metabolism