

Dietitians needed to feed the need for better nutrition

By Becca Maitland
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Poor eating habits affect health and well-being, and there is a growing demand for those trained to help people improve their health through proper diet and education.

"A registered dietitian, or RD, is a nutrition expert and often is referred to as a nutritionist. RDs are uniquely qualified to deliver medical nutrition therapy and nutrition education to various populations by translating the science of how nutrition and the body interact into useful tools, using nutrition as the fuel for better outcomes and for a healthier quality of life," said Courtney R. McNamara, MS, RD, LD, primary-care dietitian at Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, Houston and president of the Houston Area Dietetic Association.

There are many opportunities for dietitians, including work in hospitals, insurance companies, health-care facilities, food-service programs, sports teams and corporate wellness programs.

Universities and medical centers also have registered dietitians on staff to teach physicians, nurses and others the sophisticated science of food and nutrition.

"RDs also are found in community- and public-health settings teaching, monitoring, and advising the public and helping to improve their quality of life through healthy eat-

ing. RDs serve on the committee with the USDA to update the dietary guidelines for Americans," McNamara said.

There also are many research opportunities with pharmaceutical companies, universities and hospitals. In these settings, dietitians direct or conduct experiments to answer nutrition questions and find alternative foods or nutrition recommendations for the public.

"At the VA Hospital, I hold classes on weight management and classes on diabetes self-management. In addition, I provide nutrition counseling to veterans on an individual basis," McNamara said.

"To earn the RD credential, individuals must have the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in human nutrition or dietetics, complete a 900-hour internship and pass a national exam. The State of Texas requires additional paperwork and the passing of a jurisprudence exam for licensure," said Tracey Ledoux, Ph.D., RD, assistant professor of nutrition at University of Houston.

"The great thing about being a RD is that there is a place for all personalities. I work in academia, where I conduct research and teach, which requires a very different skill set than the RD who works with the Texans football team or the RD who works in the critical-care unit of the hospital managing tube feedings and IV nutrition supplementation. Most RDs however, have a passion for learning, for health, and passing on complicated information to the average



FOOD FOR LIFE: Registered dietitians have a variety of career opportunities, including working with patients in hospitals to adjust eating habits to changing health needs.

individual," Ledoux said.

The career outlook for dietitians is good. The obesity epidemic, increasing rates of chronic illnesses and increased knowledge of how lifestyle influences health status, mean RDs are in high demand, Ledoux said.

For more about UH programs in dietetics, visit <http://hhp.uh.edu/nutrition>.