

Frequently Asked Questions: Basic Career for High School Students

What is the difference between a registered dietitian (RD) or dietetic technician, registered (DTR) and a nutritionist?

The “RD” and “DTR” credentials can only be used by dietetics practitioners who are currently authorized by CADE to use these credentials. These are legally protected titles. Individuals with these credentials have completed specific academic and supervised practice requirements, successfully completed a national registration examination, and maintained requirements for recertification.

All RDs and DTRs study nutrition and applications to food and health. Some RDs or DTRs call themselves nutritionists. However, the definition and requirements for the term “nutritionist” vary. Some states have licensure laws that define the scope of practice for someone using the designation nutritionist.

What is the difference between a RD and a DTR and what career opportunities are available for each?

A RD is a food and nutrition expert who has met the minimum academic and professional requirements to qualify for the credential “RD.” To obtain this credential you must complete at least a bachelor’s degree to a U.S. regionally accredited college or university, required coursework and at least 900 hours of supervised practice accredited by CADE. In addition, you must pass a national RD examination administered by the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) and complete continuing professional educational requirements to maintain registration.

The majority of RDs work in the treatment and prevention of disease (administering medical nutrition therapy, often part of medical teams), in hospitals, HMOs, private practice or other health care facilities. In addition, a large number of RDs work in community and public health settings and academia and research. A growing number of RDs work in the food and nutrition industry, in business, journalism, sports nutrition, and corporate wellness programs.

A DTR is a food and nutrition practitioner who has completed at least a two-year associate’s degree at a U.S. regionally accredited university or college, required course work and at least 450 hours of supervised practice accredited by CADE. In addition, you must pass a national DTR examination administered by CDR and complete continuing professional educational requirements to maintain registration. The majority of DTRs work with RDs in a variety of employment settings including health care (assisting RDs in providing medical nutrition therapy), in hospitals, HMOs, clinics or other health care facilities. In addition, a large number of DTRs work in community and public health settings such as school or day care centers, correctional facilities, weight management clinics and WIC programs as nutrition counselors.

What do I need to do to become a RD?

To become a RD you would need to:

1. complete high school
2. enroll in a university that offers a Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD) granting a bachelor's degree. A DPD provides only the classroom courses and is accredited or approved by CADE.
3. After you receive your bachelor's degree, you will then need to apply for and complete a CADE-accredited Dietetic Internship Program (DI). The DI provides at least 900 hours of supervised practical experience.
4. DI graduates are eligible to take the Registration Examination for Dietitians to become credentialed as RDs, registered dietitians.

Or:

1. complete high school
2. enroll in a university that offers a Coordinated Program (CP) in dietetics granting a bachelor's degree. A CP combines classroom and at least 900 hours of supervised practical experience and is accredited by CADE.
3. CP graduates are eligible to take the Registration Examination for Dietitians to become credentialed as RDs, registered dietitians.

What do I need to do to become a DTR?

To become a DTR, you will need to:

1. complete high school
2. enroll in a college that offers a CADE-accredited associate's degree DT program. The DT program combines required dietetics coursework and at least 450 hours of supervised practical experience accredited by CADE.
3. DT graduates are eligible to take the Registration Examination for Dietetic Technicians to become credentialed as DTRs, dietitian technicians, registered.

Is the Dietetic Technician (DT) Program a stepping-stone to the programs to become a RD?

Individuals who complete an associate's degree in a CADE-accredited DT Program may be able to transfer academic credits to a bachelor's degree CP or DPD Program. Some DT Programs have established articulation agreements that specify the coursework that will be accepted as transfer credit. For those DT Programs without formal agreements, it is necessary to confer with the DPD or CP Program Director to determine if the courses you have completed will be accepted as fulfilling some of the curriculum requirements for becoming a RD.

Currently, there is one CP program for DTRs who want to become RDs. This CP is affiliated with the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. Other DT programs with articulation agreements can be found in the list of DT Programs.

How do you know which program is best? Does the Commission on the Accreditation for Dietetics Education (CADE) or the American Dietetic Association (ADA) rank programs?

Neither CADE nor ADA rate or rank programs. All CADE-accredited or approved programs meet the Accreditation Standards, which signifies that the programs provide the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies you need to enter the dietetics profession. These accredited or approved programs meet the requirements for membership in ADA and registration by CDR.

If CADE and ADA do not rank programs, what factors should I consider when deciding on a school?

This decision is a very personal one that should be made based on a variety of factors that are important to you, such as:

- Size of school and program—would you be more comfortable in a small private school or a large state (public) university?
- Cost—can you afford a private school or is a state-supported school a better value for you?
- Available financial aid—what resources are available to you?
- Geographic location—do you prefer a rural or urban setting, residential or commuter school?
- Faculty composition and qualifications—have you visited the Web site or campus and talked with faculty?
- Degree awarded—are you interested in a bachelor's or master's degree?
- Success of graduates in obtaining internship placement and jobs—how well do graduates do after completing the program?
- Success of graduates in pursuing career goals—what are your career goals and do they match the goals of the program?

Talk with the program directors at the schools you are interested in attending, discuss the program, and ask to visit. It is sometimes helpful to talk with current students and graduates or RDs and DTRs located in the area near the program to acquire information that may be helpful in making a decision.