

SportsNutrition

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How to Become a Sports Dietitian

If you are interested in becoming a sports dietitian, here are some tips--

Get a good education

If you simply want to further your personal nutrition and exercise knowledge, you can take one or two college-level classes in nutrition or exercise science without committing to four years of advanced education. However, the full dietetics program is recommended for people who want to develop a sports nutrition career. Credentials count!

Many of the larger state universities have departments in both nutrition and exercise science, and they offer degree programs in sports nutrition/sports dietetics.

- For a complete listing of sports nutrition educational opportunities, see the website of the Sports and Cardiovascular Nutrition (SCAN) dietary practice group of the American Dietetic Association: www.SCANDpg.org.
- For a list of academic programs in nutrition that are accredited by the American Dietetic Association (ADA), visit www.eatright.org, ADA's website.
- For a list of academic programs in exercise science, visit www.acsm.org, the American College of Sports Medicine's website.

If you are a personal trainer or coach who wants to help your clients with sports nutrition information but do not have the time to earn the degree and get proper credentials, make the effort to partner with a professional with the skills you do not have. For example, many coaches or personal trainers partner with dietitians.

Become a Registered Dietitian

If you want to do nutrition counseling, you legally need to become a registered dietitian (RD). This means you will be recognized by the American Dietetic Association, the nation's largest organization of nutrition professionals. By becoming a registered dietitian, you will meet state licensure laws that require nutrition counselors to meet certain standards; you will be legal. You will also be eligible to join SCAN, the sports nutrition practice group of the American Dietetic Association. SCAN members counsel clients about the nutritional aspects of sports, cardiovascular disease, wellness, and eating disorders. SCAN members are the leading sports dietitians.

As a registered dietitian, career doors will open up to you. People who take short certificate courses do not get the education received in four years of undergraduate schooling plus an internship, and generally a master's degree in nutrition. Getting proper education and credentials is a very important professional responsibility.

Clinical work experience is important

Although your career goals may be to work with athletes and other active, healthy people, I strongly recommend that students and new graduates first work in a clinical setting, such as a hospital, to learn more about how to handle heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and many of the ailments of aging. This knowledge will help you to keep people well and will also enhance your work experience. One or two years of clinical work is a good investment in your career. I have no regrets about the time I spent working in hospitals! Sports dietetics is not an entry-level position.

While working in a clinical setting, you can get involved in sports nutrition, perhaps as a volunteer for youth soccer, the YMCA, or any sports group that interests you. Join a task force for nutrition and fitness programs sponsored by your state's dietetic association or state council on physical fitness. Write articles for your local bike club or newspaper. Develop networks that will help you meet local sports dietitians and sports medicine professionals. These contacts might open doors that will eventually lead to paid work.

The Gold Standard-CSSD

Once you have accumulated two years of sports dietetics experience, you will be eligible to take an exam to become a Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD). This credential is the gold standard for sports dietitians and indicates you are highly qualified to work with athletes. For more information on how to become Board Certified, see www.SCANDpg.org.

The job market

Because sports nutrition is becoming an integral part of most athletes' training programs, job opportunities are increasingly available, particularly in the athletic departments of colleges and universities, as well as in private training centers. Other places for you to try to create a job include health clubs, YMCAs, corporate wellness programs, sports medicine practices, plastic surgery clinics ... be creative!

You may have to knock on several doors before finding a welcoming venue. Or, you can make your own job using your personal contacts. For example, some registered dietitians who are mothers of teenage athletes have started sports nutrition classes targeted for other parents, coaches, and students. RDs who love tennis, ballet, or gymnastics have become known as the sports nutritionist for their sport. Many who workout at a health club have started to counsel members of the club.

You can, indeed, create your dream job, and with hard work and patience, you will achieve your goals. Have fun!!