

Career as a Nutritionist: Key information you need

Everything you would need to know if you are keen to train to be a professional nutritionist and make it your career choice



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One of the fastest growing healthcare fields in view of the rising lifestyle-related health concerns, nutrition and wellness has come to take a sizeable space as a career option with higher education aspirants, globally and within India.

There's a direct connect with what we put on our plates and our overall well-being and nutrition is all about focusing on promoting good health through food. Nutritionists, dietitians and food health professionals do just that; they help educate others to eat and stay healthy, help prepare diet plans as per individual needs and health afflictions, and do research and development to understand how food affects the body by combining different elements such as chemistry, biology, psychology, physiology and food science. Just in case you have a penchant to eat and educate healthy eating habits, studying to be a professional nutritionist could be your choice.

Career in nutrition

Dietitians and nutritionists play a key role in helping others prevent and manage diseases and improve their overall quality of life. A deep understanding of nutrition is therefore, essential to ensure that individuals make informed food choices to maintain health, prevent chronic diseases, and improve their overall well-being. "Nutrition is the study of how food impacts the body and influences health outcomes. As a subject, it integrates knowledge from fields like biology, biochemistry, and human physiology, making it a critical interdisciplinary area of study," says Soumya Gupta, assistant professor, School of Health Sciences & Technology, UPES, Dehradun.

Structured academic pathway

To begin with, you would need to have an undergraduate degree in order to become a qualified nutritionist in India. That would need studying for a bachelor's degree in nutrition, dietetics, or home science. "The programme typically covers the basics of human nutrition, food science, human physiology, biochemistry, and nutrition across different life stages and medical nutrition therapy," says Professor Gupta.

There are quite a few good government and private institutions in India that offer undergraduate degrees in nutrition, dietetics, or home science.

Post an undergraduate programme, you can pursue a master's degree in applied nutrition, public health nutrition, clinical dietetics, or sports nutrition to gain specialised knowledge in clinical, sports or public health nutrition. A master's degree will open doors to advanced career opportunities in hospitals, academia, and public health. So will certifications such as registered dietitian and others such as certified diabetes educator and renal nutrition specialist to name a few.

For those inclined towards academia and research, pursuing a PhD in nutrition can even lead to a career in teaching or advanced research roles in universities, research institutions, or the government sector.

Scope and Opportunities

The field of nutrition has expanded significantly within India due to growing public awareness of the importance of a balanced diet and a stronger emphasis on public health initiatives. "The country faces a unique double burden of malnutrition with under nutrition and micronutrient deficiencies on one side and rising rates of obesity and diet-related chronic diseases on the other. This creates a wide range of opportunities for nutrition professionals to work in diverse sectors," says Professor Gupta.

One of the most common career paths followed by most aspirants is becoming a clinical nutritionist or dietitian. These professionals work in hospitals, clinics, and healthcare settings, helping patients manage medical conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and gastrointestinal disorders through diet. Clinical dietitians also play a critical role in managing the nutrition of patients admitted in critical care, oncology, biliary and nephrology departments.

As there is a special focus on improving community nutrition in India, especially maternal and child health, public health nutrition could be another option. "The specialisation is designed to help students learn how to create and evaluate programmes and policies that improve nutrition and promote better health for the entire population," points out Professor Gupta. By combining knowledge from nutrition and social sciences, the specialised field focuses on understanding how people's behaviours and social factors affect their eating habits and overall health.

With the growing interest in sports and fitness, sports nutrition is also an emerging field in India. Nutritionists specialising in this area work with athletes and fitness enthusiasts to optimise their performance through personalised nutrition plans, managing everything from energy intake to hydration and recovery. On the other hand of the spectrum could be food industry and product development. The food industry in India is expanding rapidly with increased demand for healthy, nutritionally rich, fortified and functional foods and nutritionists are involved in research and development, food product design and development, quality control, besides ensuring regulatory compliance with food safety standards. "With the rise in awareness around health and wellness, nutritionists can also work with companies to develop products that cater to specific dietary needs such as gluten-free, keto, low-fat, or high-protein foods," observes Professor Gupta.

There is also a growing demand for academics in universities and colleges, where nutritionists can contribute to educating the next generation of professionals as well as conducting cutting-edge research on topics such as maternal and child health, food fortification, and bio-fortification.