

# Include Coverage for Dietitian Services in Employee Health Plans

*It's cost-effective*

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## The Problem

If your employee health plan does not include coverage for dietitian services then your employees are missing out on an important cost-effective benefit that is critical to supporting their health, wellness and productivity.

## Analysis of the Situation

Access to dietitians is generally limited to those:

1. admitted to a health care facility such as a hospital or long-term care facility,
2. with a diabetes diagnosis who can access a diabetes education centre in their community
3. who have a primary health care/family health network in their community, a service that is not universally available across Canada.

For the average Canadian who wants to take steps to stay healthy, minimize chronic disease risk or manage certain conditions such as diabetes or food allergies, registered dietitian services are generally not available. Consulting dietitians who provide nutrition counselling services are accessible across Canada and can be located through Dietitians of Canada's at [www.dietitians.ca/find](http://www.dietitians.ca/find)

## The facts on the health of Canadians:

- half of Canadians over the age of 20 live with a chronic disease such as heart disease, diabetes, or hypertension<sup>1</sup>
- more than one in four live with diabetes and this will rise to one in three by 2020<sup>2</sup>
- 62% of the adults<sup>3</sup> and 32% of the children and youth<sup>4</sup> have excess weight or obesity, and
- 56% have an inadequate intake of vegetables and fruit<sup>5</sup>.

*“RDs [registered dietitians] are an important source of credible, evidence based nutrition education for the prevention and management of disease. I am often disappointed to hear that health plans do not cover this valuable healthcare practitioner yet other services that are not properly governed or monitored and do not use evidence-based practice are covered! Please include these credible and highly regulated services to help Canadians live a healthier life.”*

Susan Somerville, Toronto

## The Solution

Access to dietitian services for employees is a must. Dietitians are the only regulated health professional in Canada qualified to provide nutrition counselling. Dietitians are identified by 97% of Canadians as a credible source of food and nutrition advice.<sup>6</sup>

### Dietitians:<sup>7</sup>

- are evidence-based practitioners who translate complex scientific evidence into practical solutions to promote health and manage conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, food allergies and obesity,
- are university-educated with hundreds of hours of supervised, hand-on-training in disease management, population health, communications and counselling,
- are regulated health professionals. The title ‘dietitian’ is protected by law in all provinces. To be sure you are accessing the most qualified nutrition professional, look for the initials RD or PDt (DtP in French) after the health professional’s name or ask - are you a dietitian? You can check the registry of the [provincial dietitian regulatory body](#) to confirm that a health practitioner is registered.
- individualize information, care plans and programs to meet the unique health needs of clients
- work collaboratively with other health care professionals.

## Cost–benefit analysis

Dietitians have the scientific knowledge and counselling skills needed to deliver effective dietary advice. They apply behaviour change techniques and counselling methods and tailor nutrition advice to the needs of the client. Dietitians of Canada has reviewed the evidence and we can report that nutrition counselling makes a difference.

- Lifestyle interventions (nutrition counselling, physical activity and behaviour modification)<sup>8</sup> can:
  - o reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes by up to 70% in adults at risk
  - o improve blood pressure and cholesterol levels (after at least 3 months)
  - o decrease body weight by about 3-6 kg (after at least 12 months).
- Diet counselling improves general dietary behaviours associated with good health such as increased fruit, vegetable, and fibre intake and decreased fat intake<sup>9</sup>

### **Potential cost savings on drug therapy with nutrition counselling by dietitians**

Two US studies<sup>10</sup> on the cost effectiveness of medical nutrition therapy (MNT) by registered dietitians concluded that for every dollar spent on MNT there was a cost savings of more than \$4.00.

In the first study, patients with hyperlipidemia (high LDL cholesterol levels) who were not yet on statin drug therapy had two to four visits with a registered dietitian over a six to eight week period for an average of 144 ± 21 minutes. LDL levels dropped sufficiently in 51% of patients so they did not require statin therapy with an overall cost savings of \$4.28 for every dollar spent on MNT.

A second study found similar results with a cost savings in statin therapy of \$3.03 for every dollar spent on MNT. In this study, the average number of visits with the dietitian was three (169 minutes) over a seven-week period. The studies concluded that diet intervention should be the first step taken to lower blood cholesterol levels.

According to a 2014 fee guidelines report<sup>11</sup> prepared by the Consulting Dietitians Network of Dietitians of Canada, the average hourly fee charged for nutrition counselling services in Canada is \$106. Based on the results of these two US Studies, if an employee with high blood cholesterol billed their health plan provider for \$300 (169 minutes with a dietitian) for nutrition counselling with a dietitian, the potential savings in drug costs alone could be \$1,200 (spend \$1 and save \$4).

### **Reducing costs associated with managing cardiovascular disease and stroke**

According to a 2009 Public Health Agency of Canada report on heart disease and stroke in Canada<sup>12</sup>, a conservative estimate of the number of Canadians living with either condition is 1.6 million or 5.9% of Canadians over the age of 12. Nine out of 10 Canadians over the age of 20 have at least one of the risk factors associated with heart disease including overweight/obesity and/or a poor diet and 56% do not eat the recommended number of servings of vegetables and fruit. The direct and indirect costs of cardiovascular disease in 2000 were \$22.2 million with 9.6% of the costs being for drug therapy, 18.7% for long-term disability and 5.3% for short-term disability.

If employees had access to nutrition counselling by a dietitian and used this service, the total cost of reimbursement for drug costs would fall and the indirect costs of lost days of work through short and long-term disability would decline.

### **Lost work productivity and disability days minimized with lifestyle intervention delivered by dietitians**

In a randomized control clinical study of US health plan members with type 2 diabetes and obesity (BMI ≥ 27)<sup>13</sup>, an intensive lifestyle intervention delivered by a dietitian (6 individual sessions for a total of 4 hours plus 6 one-hour group sessions and monthly follow-up by phone over a one year period) reduced the risk of work days lost by 64% and decreased the risk of disability days by 87% compared to those receiving the usual medical care. The net program cost (based on 2002 US dollars) per person per year was \$328.

## Other health conditions where dietary intervention can make a difference

The available evidence on the difference dietary interventions can make and the associated costs savings is primarily related to chronic disease and obesity management. However, according to a 2009 report, one in 13 Canadians (6-8%) has a food allergy<sup>14</sup>, and up to 20% are affected by irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) with more than 40% of these indicating that they avoid certain activities including work because of their IBS symptoms<sup>15</sup>. Employees would also benefit from nutrition counselling by a registered dietitian to help them cope with food restrictions and manage symptoms.

## Canadian companies that include dietitians services in their employee health plans

In 2015, we polled members of the Consulting Dietitians Network to identify Canadian companies that included dietitian services in their employee health plans. The resulting list clearly indicates that many major companies and organizations include dietitian services in their employee health plans.

- Abbott Nutrition
- Banks - TD, CIBC, RBC
- Canada Post
- City of Winnipeg, City of Calgary
- Federal Department of National Defense
- Global News
- Hydro - BC and Manitoba
- Loblaw Companies Limited
- Province of Manitoba, Nova Scotia
- RCMP
- Some school districts and Teacher's Associations – varies from province to province
- Shaw
- Sobeys
- Telus
- Universities - Ottawa, UBC, Saskatoon, Manitoba, Winnipeg
- Workman's Compensation Board

This is not an exhaustive list and the content has not been confirmed with all the named companies.

## Conclusions

The societal and economic impact of chronic disease and obesity in the workplace is significant. Extended health plan costs are strained by the high prevalence of chronic disease and obesity. Those living with one or more chronic diseases and/or obesity are missing more days of work and are not as productive when they are at work. Although evidence-based and cost-effective life-style interventions delivered by dietitians can reduce or eliminate the need for

expensive drug therapy and help patients lose weight and eat better, access to dietitian services through some employee health care plan remains unavailable.

Given the growing prevalence of chronic disease and obesity, the prevalence of health conditions that impact eating behaviours such as food allergies and irritable bowel syndrome, and the poor eating habits of many Canadians, the associated costs will only increase with a substantial burden to plan providers and employers.

Protect and promote the nutritional health of your employees and their families by providing access to nutrition counselling services delivered by a registered dietitian.

### **About Dietitians of Canada**

Dietitians of Canada is the national professional association for dietitians, representing more than 5,000 members at the local, provincial and national level. As the voice of the profession, we strive for excellence in advancing health through food and nutrition.

You can locate a dietitian for nutrition counselling and nutrition services at <http://www.dietitians.ca/find>.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. 2015. Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention Strategic Plan 2016-2019: Improving Health Outcomes, a Paradigm Shift. Available at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cd-mc/assets/pdf/ccdp-strategic-plan-2016-2019-plan-strategique-cpmc-eng.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Diabetes Association. 2010. Diabetes: Canada at the Tipping Point. Charting a new path. Available at <http://www.diabetes.ca/CDA/media/documents/publications-and-newsletters/advocacy-reports/canada-at-the-tipping-point-english.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. Body Composition of Adults, 2012 to 2013. Available at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2009/cvd-avc/summary-resume-eng.php>

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. Body Mass Index of Canadian Children and Youth, 2009-2011. Available at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2012001/article/11712-eng.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. 2009. Tracking Heart Disease and Stroke in Canada. Available at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2009/cvd-avc/pdf/cvd-avs-2009-eng.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Dietitians of Canada. 2012. Ipsos Reid Poll.

<sup>7</sup> Dietitians of Canada, 2014. Dietitians promote health through food and nutrition. Available at <http://www.dietitians.ca/Downloads/Public/Dietitians-SmartChoice-Col.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Dietitians of Canada. What is the effectiveness of dietary or lifestyle interventions for preventing or treating chronic disease in the primary care setting? In: Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition® [PEN]. 2016 Sept 12. Available from: <http://www.pennutrition.com>. The PEN System: an international, online, evidence-based, peer reviewed database for nutrition guidance.

<sup>9</sup> Dietitians of Canada. In healthy adults and adults with chronic disease, what is the impact on health behaviour change of telehealth interventions delivered by health care providers compared with usual care? In: Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition® [PEN]. 2016 Jan 13. Available from: <http://www.pennutrition.com>. The PEN System: an international, online, evidence-based, peer reviewed database for nutrition guidance

<sup>10</sup> Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. 2012. National Coverage Determination Formal Request. JAND Vol 112. No 1.

<sup>11</sup> Consulting Dietitians Network. 2014. Fees Guidelines.

<sup>12</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. 2009. Tracking Heart Disease and Stroke in Canada. Available at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2009/cvd-avc/pdf/cvd-avs-2009-eng.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Wolf AM, Siadat M, Crowther JQ, et al. Impact of Lifestyle Intervention on Lost Productivity and Disability: Improving Control with Activity and Nutrition (ICAN). J Occup Environ Med. 2009 Feb; 51(2): 139–145

<sup>14</sup> Allergic Living 2009. Available at <http://allergicliving.com/2010/07/02/food-allergy-canadian-statistics-revealed/>

<sup>15</sup> Gastrointestinal Society. 2013. Irritable Bowel Syndrome Affects up to 6.7 million Canadians. Available at <http://healthcaretransformation.ca/irritable-bowel-syndrome-affects-up-to-6-7-million-canadians/>