

Role of Dietitians in the fight against COVID-19

EFAD Briefing Paper

Dietitians are *the* clinical nutrition experts. Highly qualified and legally regulated, they are the only professionals specifically trained to support the nutrition and hydration needs of acutely and chronically ill people with a wide range of conditions and to monitor the nutritional status of populations at risk, including older adults and people with food insecurity. This briefing outlines the core role that dietitians are playing in the response to COVID-19, from the frontline in acute care to population level advice and support in acute community care, primary care, food service and education.

Treating COVID in critical care

Most patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) with COVID-19 will be sedated, ventilated and will have nutrition, hydration and medications delivered through feeding tubes. Feeding tubes are used to deliver the protein and calories required to meet the demands on the body. In some cases, nutrition and hydration will be delivered directly into the vein. Dietitians are essential to ensuring that nutrition is delivered in the safest and most effective way for each patient. Dietitians are experts in assessing the nutritional demands of each individual patient taking into account the age, gender and other underlying medical conditions the patient may have. Analysis from the International Nutrition Survey continually shows that there is a direct correlation between the total number of funded dietitians in intensive care and improved patient care¹.

Patients in ICU, care homes and their own homes can experience malnutrition, changes in eating patterns, loss of sense of taste and smell and have a poor appetite before, during and after critical illness which can directly impact on recovery and rehabilitation. During the COVID 19 pandemic, critical care dietitians also have a huge role in upskilling and training non-critical care dietitians, to assist in managing the increasing numbers of critically ill patients being admitted to hospital or cared for in the community. This involves training our colleagues how to assess nutritional status and recommend nutritional support, tailored to each individual patient. EFAD has collated information from around Europe on nutritional support during critical care².

Helping people get back on their feet

Even when people are well enough to leave hospital after COVID-19, their journey is not over. Dietitians have an important role to play in rehabilitation, reducing risk of complications and shortening recovery times. Patients who have suffered COVID-19 and been hospitalised will be at increased risk of malnutrition and will likely have suffered loss of muscle during their stay. Dietitians can recommend nutrient rich, fortified, tasty foods or specialist nutrition supplements to help people regain the weight and muscle that may have been lost. This will often involve direct community support, follow up phone calls and close liaison with other health professions who are supporting rehabilitation.

Supporting vulnerable people with technology

People with pre-existing health conditions, such as malnutrition, cancer, obesity, diabetes, food allergy and eating disorders to name but a few, also require support, even if the COVID-19 lockdown has made it more difficult to access it as they normally would. Dietitians normally support some of the more vulnerable population groups in a community. These patients still need our help even during COVID-19 through food education programs, identifying incidences of social isolation and assisting local authorities with food supply. Dietitians are using technology to great effect, including video conferencing and specialist apps to provide consultations and support to patients who need them.

People's mental health will also have been affected by increased isolation and worry, and for those with

¹ <https://www.ficm.ac.uk/sites/default/files/gpics-v2.pdf>

² <http://www.efad.org/en-us/covid-19/2-critical-care-nutritional-support-while-body-fights-infection/>

conditions such as eating disorders, support from specialist mental health dietitians will be vital, especially as many of their support networks may not be available. Dietitians continue to work with specialist third sector organisations to provide remote support wherever possible. What is more, these groups will no doubt need additional support once the COVID-19 pandemic abates. Many will have been struggling to maintain their health and wellbeing, but may have held off on accessing health services either because of fear of infection or a desire to reduce pressure on health services and care staff. Dietitians are therefore planning for a significant spike in demand later this year, when many patients may need additional support to optimise their health.

Supporting Public Health

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic the World Health Organization (WHO) emphasised the importance of appropriate diet and lifestyle measures, including adequate nutrition, for the normal function of the immune system. Poor nutrition, due to either insufficient dietary intake of key nutrients, excessive energy intake or a poor overall diet quality, can compromise immune function and increase overall infection risk. But for the many people that are not dealing with COVID-19 or existing health conditions, lockdown presents many challenges, partly because of food shortages and also because of the requirement to reduce frequency of food shopping trips. Accessing and/or maintaining a healthy diet and getting sufficient exercise during this time is more difficult and early evidence indicates people of all ages are eating less healthily. That is why it is so important that public health dietitians continue to provide helpful information and guidance to the public to help them make best use of the food they can access, by promoting healthy and sustainable choices.

EFAD has collated information from around Europe on supporting the immune system and optimising health³

The pandemic is having a much greater impact on poorer members of the community who were already more likely to be suffering from food insecurity, hence the importance of mapping this risk. Research by the UK Food Foundation estimates over three million people in UK have slipped into food poverty as a result of COVID-19. Other European countries have similar scenarios. The usual safety nets such as food banks are under greater strain and finding it more difficult to support people while social distancing. Although nobody should be in food poverty, dietitians still have an important role to both help identify those at risk and to ensure support provides the best nutrition in the circumstances. This includes having an updated knowledge of the local nutritional assistance programs, developing healthier menus and advice for families cooking on limited budgets and suggesting ways of reducing food waste for a more sustainable food system.

Centrally, dietitians share public health messaging, and collaborate with other organisations to raise awareness of public health issues, such as concern about Vitamin D status amongst those staying indoors for a prolonged period, with governments.

Tackling harmful myths

Sadly, as many people struggle to understand the COVID-19 pandemic and seek out solutions or comfort online, there have been some people willing to exploit that and share unhelpful and unevidenced “cures” and solutions. This has ranged from the downright ridiculous to the dangerously believable. It was estimated that in one week over half of UK adults were exposed to misinformation about COVID-19 online. Dietitians have an important role to play in busting these myths, both on social media and more conventional press and TV.

Call to Action

Everyone should continue to follow WHO and Government advice such as remaining at home and social distancing, alongside meticulous hand-hygiene. Diet and lifestyle measures are not a substitute for current public health advice, but we hope that this briefing will help dietitians, health professionals, health caterers, policymakers and members of the public to **optimize nutrition for everyone** as we wait for the COVID-19 pandemic to pass.

The European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians (EFAD)

De Molen 93, 3995AW Houten, The Netherlands

Email: secretariat@efad.org

www.EFAD.org

May 2020

³ <http://www.efad.org/en-us/covid-19/1-public-health-nutrition-advice-for-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>