



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Parkinson's & Dietitian Connection

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Parkinson's isn't just about movement on the outside – those things we can see; it can also slow your digestion, cause constipation, and can make eating more difficult (for some people). Often overlooked, a Registered Dietitian can be a great addition to your healthcare team. You might be thinking, “Do I really need a dietitian?” It's a fair question — but when you're living with Parkinson's, nutrition can become a bit more complicated than just choosing whole grains or avoiding too much salt. A Registered Dietitian can do so much more than just talk about food groups; they're like a food-savvy detective who can help figure out how to get your digestive system back on track.

How can a Dietitian Help?

A Registered Dietitian can help identify if you're missing key nutrients, offer strategies for swallowing difficulties, and support you in managing things like constipation or unintentional weight loss — all of which are common concerns for people with Parkinson's that can affect overall well-being.

They'll create a personalized meal plan tailored to your or your loved one's lifestyle, food preferences, cooking setup, and budget. They'll consider:

- **Is the person cooking and/or eating independently?**
- **Are there challenges with swallowing, appetite, chewing, or digestion?**
- **Do symptoms like low blood pressure or GI issues need to be considered?**
- **And are there any interactions between foods or supplements and Parkinson's medications that you should be aware of?**

- **Another great reason to connect with a dietitian? In today's world of endless (and often conflicting) information — especially online — it's easy to get overwhelmed or misled when it comes to nutrition.**

From trendy diets to miracle supplements, there's a lot of misinformation out there, and some of it can actually do more harm than good. A diet that works for one person might not be right — or even safe — for someone else, especially when managing a condition like Parkinson's.

A registered dietitian cuts through the noise. They base their advice on science-backed research, not fads or guesses. And more importantly, they tailor their guidance specifically to you or your loved one's needs, preferences, and medical situation. Like all regulated health professionals, dietitians are required to stay up to date with the latest research, skills, and techniques — so you can trust you're getting safe, current, and reliable support.

Is there a difference between a nutritionist and dietitian?

Confused about the difference between a dietitian and a nutritionist? You're not alone!

The two terms are often used interchangeably, but they aren't the same—especially in Canada, where regulations vary by province. In Alberta, both titles are regulated. Only Registered Dietitians can legally use the title “Dietitian” or “Nutritionist”. In other provinces, anyone can call themselves a nutritionist, regardless of training.

- **In Alberta, a Registered Dietitian (RD) is a regulated health professional with a specific educational background and clinical experience. Some Registered Dietitians refer to themselves as “Nutritionists” or have titles like “Community Nutritionist” but can only do so if they have met**

educational requirements, such as a bachelor's or master's degree in nutrition/dietetics, undergone supervised internship and passed a national exam.

- Dietitians are more specialized in providing evidence-based advice for medical conditions like Parkinson's, while some nutritionists may focus more on general health and wellness.

To be sure you are accessing the most qualified nutrition professional, look for the initials RD (Registered Dietitian) after the health professional's name or simply ask them - are you a Registered Dietitian?

How do you access a Registered Dietitian?

There are two options you can choose from, either public or private.

- **Public services** are often available through home care, community health centers, or programs covered by Alberta Health Services (AHS), Northwest Territories Health and Social Services (NTHSSA), or Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA). You might need a referral from your doctor, and there could be a bit of a wait, but it's usually free or low-cost.
 - Ask your doctor for a referral to a Registered Dietitian.
 - Many hospitals and health centres across Alberta, Northwest Territories, and Saskatchewan (including rural and remote areas), can provide access to outpatient dietitian services. It's always best to check with your community's service location for more detailed information. They may or may not require a doctor's referral.
 - Public home care can sometimes help get you connected as well.
- **Private services** give you more flexibility — you can choose who you work with and often get started more quickly. These services have a fee, but some costs might be covered by insurance or benefits. Check with your insurance to see what your policy covers.
- Before booking, it's a good idea to check with your health insurance provider — some plans cover dietitian services, either partially or in full, up to a certain amount. If you don't have coverage, you can still book privately, just keep in mind that you'd be responsible for covering the cost out of pocket.
 - Some options to help connect you with a private dietitian:
 - Find a dietitian through Dietitian Directory (www.dietitiandirectory.com)
 - Search online on the Dietitians of Canada website (www.dietitians.ca). Choose the heading "Find a Dietitian" to find a Registered Dietitian located near you.

Staying healthy on the inside, is just as important as staying healthy on the outside! If you need help finding resources, service providers, or navigating public/private access you can always reach out to us (1-800-561-1911), and we'll be happy to help! ■

