



# The Role of Food Service Dietitians in the NHS



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A career as a food service dietitian is a niche speciality that has gained increasing attention in recent years, following the 2020 Independent Review of Hospital Food that recommended that every NHS trust appoint a food service dietitian to oversee patient, staff and visitor catering.<sup>1</sup> Food service dietitians play a crucial role in bridging the gap between catering and clinical staff, ultimately improving patient outcomes and hospital experiences.<sup>2, 3</sup> Additionally, they contribute to the NHS's goal of achieving net zero by 2040 by reducing food waste and promoting more sustainable food options.<sup>4, 5</sup>

## Role & responsibilities

Food service dietitians are integral members of hospital catering teams, working closely with other allied health professionals (AHPs) and the wider multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs). They translate patient dietary plans and interventions into suitable food choices and meal options. A food service dietitian working in an NHS trust can confidently state that *“every inpatient is on my caseload”*.<sup>2</sup>

Key responsibilities include:<sup>2, 6</sup>

1. **Staff training:** Ensuring that catering staff adhere to guidelines and serve food safely, particularly for patients with allergies or intolerances.
2. **Menu development:** Regularly reviewing and adjusting meal options based on seasonality, patient preferences (from ongoing surveys), demographic considerations (e.g. ethnic and religious needs), and clinical requirements (e.g. renal, dementia and paediatrics).
3. **Menu coding:** Categorising meals according to dietary needs (see **Table 1**).
4. **Policy development:** Contributing to the formulation of trust-wide nutrition and food policies.

**Table 1: Menu coding<sup>7</sup>**

Code	Description
Higher energy	Designed to provide increased energy, protein, vitamins and essential nutrients for patients with greater nutritional requirements.
Easy to chew	For patients who struggle with chewing but do not require texture-modified diets under the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) guidelines.
Vegetarian	Includes dairy and eggs but excludes meat, poultry, fish, shellfish and animal-derived ingredients.
Vegan	Free from all animal products, including meat, fish, dairy, eggs and honey.
Healthier eating	Designed to meet Dietary Reference Values (DRVs) for fat, saturated fat and salt, with no added sugar or <5 g sugar per 100 g.

## The role of food service dietitians in reducing malnutrition

Did you know that malnutrition costs the NHS a staggering £19.6 billion annually?<sup>7</sup> It's an issue that affects patients of all ages that often goes unnoticed during their hospital stays. Dietitians play a key role in identifying at-risk patients and developing tailored plans to optimise their nutritional intake.<sup>3</sup>

Food service dietitians specifically support a food-first approach by ensuring that hospital meals are nutritionally adequate (see **Table 2**), well-balanced and appealing.<sup>2, 8</sup> They also help implement protected mealtimes, ensuring patients have uninterrupted time to eat, free from non-urgent medical procedures or tests.<sup>6, 7</sup> They also provide new ways of introducing meals to promote intake, like implementing a platter style menu to improve the nutrition status of dementia patients in the hospital.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2: Nutritional requirements<sup>7</sup>**

Nutrient (/day)	Nutritionally well patients: Those with normal nutritional requirements and normal appetite or those with a condition requiring a diet that follows healthier eating principles.	Nutritionally vulnerable patients: Those with normal nutritional requirements but with poor appetite and/or unable to eat normal quantities at mealtimes, or with increased nutritional needs.
Energy (kcal)	1840–2772 kcal	1840–2772 kcal
Protein (g)	56 g	79–92 g

## Sustainability

NHS food and catering services produce approximately 1,543 kilotonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (ktCO<sub>2</sub>e) annually, contributing to about 6% of total NHS emissions.<sup>10</sup> Food service dietitians play an essential role in meeting the NHS's net zero target by 2040 by addressing food waste, which costs the NHS an estimated £230 million per year.<sup>11</sup> According to NHS England, up to 18% of hospital food is wasted, meaning that significant amounts of resources used in food production (including carbon emissions) are ultimately lost.<sup>5, 12</sup>

One of the key ways food service dietitians address food waste is by developing patient-centred menus that cater to demographic

diversity. For example, hospitals may offer Asian vegetarian and Afro-Caribbean options, alongside religious-specific meals such as halal and kosher. Ensuring that menus reflect patient preferences and dietary surveys leads to greater satisfaction, less uneaten food and, ultimately, a reduction in food waste.

## Lower carbon menus

Many NHS trusts are now adapting low-carbon footprint menus to align with the NHS net zero target. For example, some trusts are implementing a 20% reduction in meat-based options, as this shift has been shown to lower overall carbon emissions.<sup>4, 6</sup>

According to the Eatwell Guide, a diet that consists of 80% plant-based foods (fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes) can result in a 31% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, a 17% decrease in water usage, and a 34% reduction in land use.<sup>6</sup>

Encouraging patients to opt for plant-based menu items can be achieved through:<sup>6</sup>

- Enhancing meal presentation to make plant-based options more appealing
- Placing plant-based dishes at the start of menus, increasing the likelihood that patients will select them
- Training staff to promote plant-based meals by emphasising their health and environmental benefits.

## Challenges & limitations

Despite their critical role, food service dietitians face several challenges within the NHS:

- 1. Lack of awareness among stakeholders:** Not all hospitals have a dedicated food service dietitian, despite the recommendations of the 2020 Independent Review of Hospital Food.<sup>1</sup>
- 2. Limited availability of sustainable food options:** Many NHS suppliers have yet to fully integrate sustainable food options, making it difficult to source low-carbon meals.<sup>5</sup>
- 3. Cost constraints:** Rising food costs, which have steadily increased since 2014,<sup>13</sup> make it challenging for trusts to experiment with innovative, nutritious and sustainable meal options.

## Conclusion

Food service dietitians are vital to improving inpatient nutrition by ensuring that hospital food is nutritionally adequate, culturally appropriate and appealing. Their expertise is also key in reducing food waste and supporting the NHS's net zero goals by adopting sustainable meal options. As awareness of their role continues to grow, food service dietitians will remain essential contributors to hospital catering and patient care.

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