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Practice Competence for RDNs in Digestive Health

A Scope and Standards of Practice Framework for
Registered Dietitian Nutritionists in Digestive Health

Approved by:
Practice Competence Committee
Commission on Dietetic Registration

Reviewed by Digestive Health experts:
Stacey Collins, MS, RDN, CSDH, LDN
Briza York, RD, CSDH, CSP, LD, CD

Introduction

This article highlights core concepts of nutrition and dietetics practice in the focus area of digestive health. This article is not a scope and standards of practice in the focus area of digestive health. This should be viewed as a complementary resource to the “Revised 2024 Scope and Standards of Practice for the Registered Dietitian Nutritionist,” which can be found at <https://www.eatrightpro.org/practice/scope-and-standards-of-practice>.

Note: The article uses the term RDN to refer to both registered dietitians (RDs) and registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs).

With the launch of the new Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) credential: Board Certified Specialist in Digestive Health (CSDH), CDR has developed this snapshot for Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) practicing in the focus area of digestive health.

A focus area of nutrition and dietetics is a defined area of practice that requires focused knowledge, skills, and experience that applies to all levels of practice.¹ This article, along with the “2024 Scope and Standards of Practice for Registered Dietitian Nutritionists”² and the “2018 Code of Ethics for the Nutrition and Dietetics Profession”³ can be used by RDNs to guide their practice and performance. These foundational documents along with this article support RDNs in various digestive health settings (eg, clinical, community, academia, industry) by illustrating how they:

- are uniquely qualified to provide nutrition and dietetics care and services;
- demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and competencies for the provision of safe, effective, and quality care and services at the competent, proficient, and expert levels of practice; and
- use a systematic approach to benchmarking levels of proficiency and determining paths for knowledge and skill development for personal and professional advancement.

Overview of Digestive Health Practice

Digestive health refers to the comprehensive health of the digestive system, including diseases involving the gastrointestinal organs, as well as optimal functioning of the digestive system, which includes the breakdown of food, absorption of nutrients, and elimination of waste. It also encompasses the health of the gut microbiota which plays a vital role in digestion, immunity, and overall well-being.^{4,5}

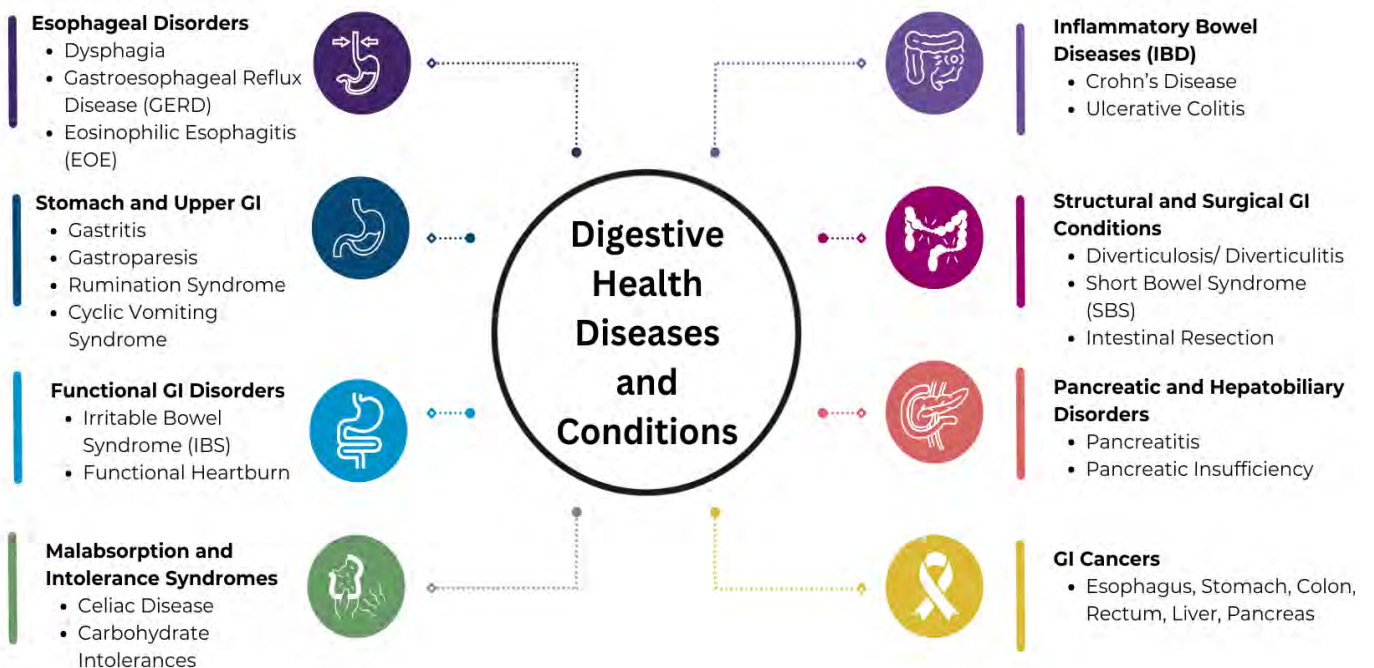
RDNs work “directly with individuals exhibiting symptoms of, or diagnosed with, gastrointestinal (GI) conditions in a variety of settings (eg, hospitals, clinical, private practice) OR indirectly through roles in management, education, industry, and research practice linked specifically to nutrition for digestive health and GI conditions”.⁶ Based on the needs of the patient population, RDNs may collaborate with interprofessional team members, including gastroenterologists, hepatologists, surgeons, oncologists (for

GI cancers), nurses, pharmacists, speech pathologists, GI mental health clinicians, and others, to assist individuals with a digestive disease or condition to address nutritional needs and support quality of life. In addition, opportunities exist for RDN leadership to address the nutritional needs of patients, advocate for RDN involvement in interprofessional practices settings, and lead/participate in quality improvement projects and/or research studies.

RDNs practicing in digestive health must also consider population-specific needs, such as parent/caregiver involvement when working in pediatrics, care coordination for individuals requiring outpatient nutrition support, or consideration of advanced directives or other documentation when working with individuals nearing the end of life. Ethical considerations such as respecting autonomy, cultural traditions, and privacy are imperative due to the vulnerability and complexity of this patient/client population.

Disorders range from functional gastrointestinal disorders (ie, motility, sensation, disorders of brain-gut interaction [DGBIs]) to esophageal disorders, Inflammatory Bowel Diseases (ie, Crohn’s Disease, Ulcerative Colitis), short bowel syndrome, pancreatitis, celiac disease,⁷ and carbohydrate intolerance/malabsorption⁸ (Refer to Figure 1). A [reference list](#)⁹ is available to assist with increasing knowledge as well as preparing for the CSDH examination. If obtaining the CSDH certification is a goal, review recent resources related to GI/Digestive Health, including textbooks, peer-reviewed articles and online resources.

Figure 1. Digestive Health Diseases and Conditions. GI= Gastrointestinal



Consider the following knowledge areas or actions when evaluating competence in caring for individuals with digestive diseases or conditions.¹⁰

- Investigate digestive diseases and conditions common in individuals of all ages or across the lifespan who receive care in settings such as:
 - Gastrointestinal (GI) structural & functional disorders (eg, dysphagia, GERD, gastritis, diverticular disease, short bowel system, intestinal resection, irritable bowel syndrome [IBS]: constipation, diarrhea, and mixed-predominant¹¹)
 - Inflammatory, immune, and autoimmune conditions (eg, Inflammatory Bowel Disease [IBD], Celiac Disease and Gluten-Related Disorders, allergies and immune-mediated food reactions¹²)
 - Food and nutrition-impacted conditions related to nutrient digestion, absorption, or relationships with food (eg, carbohydrate intolerance [eg, sucrose, lactose, fructose], disordered eating and eating disorders,¹³ impact of and nutrition therapy approach for comorbidities [eg, cancer, diabetes])
- Review applicable practice guidelines from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Academy) Evidence Analysis Library,¹⁴ and professional organizations such as the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA)¹⁵ and American College of Gastroenterology (ACG)¹⁶ applicable to the populations with digestive diseases or conditions
- Consider the signs and symptoms of digestive disorders, presence or risk of malnutrition, comorbidities such as diabetes or cancer, relevant laboratory and other medical tests or procedures, common pharmacotherapy, and other data relevant to the population receiving care and services when applying the Nutrition Care Process:
 - Nutrition assessment and diagnosis
 - Nutrition intervention, monitoring, and evaluation
 - Nutrition education
 - Transitions and/or coordination of care such as referral to an RDN for outpatient follow-up, referral to another interprofessional team member, connecting to community resources

Expanding or strengthening knowledge and skills and demonstrating competence in practice with the patient/client population supports recognition by interprofessional team members. This promotes the RDN serving as an integral team member in providing quality care and services to individuals with digestive health diseases and conditions desiring an improved quality of life.

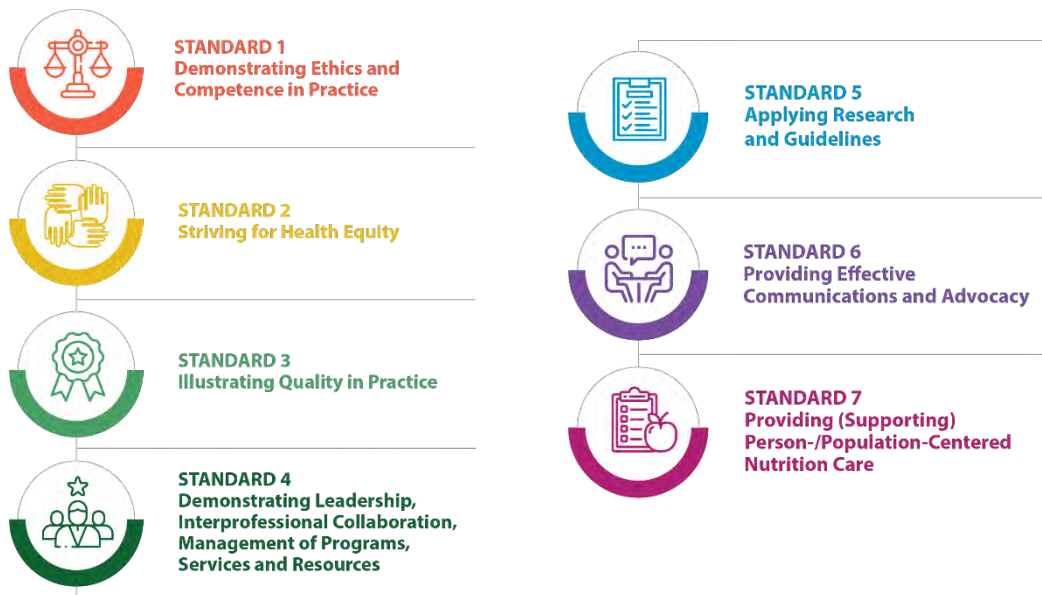
Standards of Practice

The 2024 Scope and Standards of Practice for the RDN² applies to all RDNs no matter the area(s) of practice. RDNs can use the additional information in this article to assist with providing care for individuals with digestive diseases or conditions.

The 2024 Scope and Standards of Practice for the RDN² serves as a blueprint for the development of focus area scope and standards (access through the Academy’s website at <https://www.eatrightpro.org/practice/scope-and-standards-of-practice>). The 2024 Scope and Standards and a focus area scope and standards should be used concurrently. Focus area scope and standards of practice follow the format of the 2024 Scope and Standards with inclusion of the same set of 7 standards (Figure 2) but, with outcome indicators for 3 levels of practice (competent, proficient, and expert). The focus area standards provide:

- a guide for self-evaluation;
- a resource to determine education, training, and experience necessary to demonstrate competency in the focus area; and
- resources for knowledge and application that supports care and services with patient/client population or to share with interprofessional team colleagues.

Figure 2. Standards of Practice²



LEVELS OF PRACTICE

While the 2024 Scope and Standards for the RDN provides 7 standards for the competent level of practice, a focus area scope and standards provides RDNs guidance in the form of indicators for 3 levels of practice (ie, competent, proficient, and expert) in a defined practice area. See [Figure 3](#) for an overarching practice delineation between the competent, proficient, and expert levels of practice in digestive health that can serve as a guide to developing and advancing practice. A proficient RDN may be working towards obtaining the CSDH credential, which, once obtained, demonstrates proficiency in this specialized practice area, the RDN's value to employers, stakeholders, other members of the interprofessional team, and prospective patients/clients. However, practice at a proficient or expert level does not necessitate the attainment of the CSDH credential.

Until such time that a full-length scope and standards in the focus area of digestive health is developed, RDNs working within digestive health should seek out focus area scope and standards most applicable to their task or role. For example, a pediatric RDN may use the [Revised 2022 Standards of Practice and Standards of Professional Performance for Registered Dietitian Nutritionists in Pediatric Nutrition](#)¹⁷ to assist in assessing their individual competence while an RDN working with patients/clients with GI cancers may use the [Revised 2025 Scope and Standards of Practice for Registered Dietitian Nutritionists in Oncology Nutrition](#).¹⁸ Similarly, RDNs working with patients/clients should reference and apply evidenced-based, clinical practice updates established by the Academy, AGA, and ACG. Proficient- and expert-level descriptions in focus area scope and standards are not equivalent to, but may be consistent with a CDR certification, eg, Board Certified Specialist in Digestive Health (CSDH), Board Certified Specialist in Pediatrics (CSP), and Board Certified Specialist in Oncology Nutrition (CSO).

Figure 3. Advancing Practice in Digestive Health

In any practice setting, competent practitioners are expected to critically evaluate their own practice; improve performance based on self-awareness, applied science, and feedback from others; and engage in continuing education to enhance skills, proficiency, and knowledge. Self-evaluation is particularly important when beginning practice or shifting roles throughout the practitioner’s career ([Academy Definition of Terms](#)¹; see Competence Section for Levels of Practice).

When performing a self-evaluation, the RDN:

- uses the 2024 Scope and Standards for RDNs and applicable focus area standards (eg, Diabetes Care, Weight Management, Nutrition Support) to self-evaluate level of practice and to determine areas to strengthen;
- applies evidence-based research and resources including nutrition-related guidelines from professional organizations (eg, American Diabetes Association [ADA], American Gastroenterological Association [AGA], American College of Gastroenterology [ACG], American Heart Association [AHA], American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition [ASPEN]) and the Academy’s Evidence Analysis Library (EAL) Projects for information and to implement appropriate interventions;
- updates their professional development plan to include applicable [essential practice competencies](#)¹⁹ for current and future practice areas for patient/client care and services; and considers working toward (competent level) or applying for/maintaining desired credential(s) (eg, Certified Specialist in Digestive Health [CSDH], the Certified Specialist in Obesity and Weight Management [CSOWM]) (proficient or expert levels).

Determine actionable goals based on self-assessment and career priorities. Practice level descriptions below would apply to RDNs interested in the digestive health practice area.

Competent	Proficient	Expert
Description		
The RDN consistently provides safe and reliable services by employing appropriate knowledge, skills, behaviors, and values in accordance with accepted standards for the profession. ¹	The RDN has obtained operational job performance knowledge and skills, consistently provides safe and reliable service and is more skilled at adapting and applying evidence-based guidelines and best practices and can modify practice according to unique situations. ¹	The RDN is recognized within the profession as an expert through demonstrated contributions to the profession (eg, authorship, leadership, speaking/teaching engagements), and has mastered the highest degree of skill in and knowledge of nutrition and dietetics. ¹
Core Digestive Health Education, Training, and Credentialing		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gains knowledge and skills specific to gastrointestinal (GI) diseases or conditions • Implements medical nutrition therapy (MNT), including evidence-based 	<u>In addition to competent-level approaches:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtains additional training and/or mentoring with expert GI RDN • Provides person-centered GI-focused MNT, care and services considering: 	<u>In addition to competent- and proficient-level approaches:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains or expands current nutrition science knowledge with recommended CPEUs per 5-year period

Competent	Proficient	Expert
<p>nutrition and GI/digestive health-related care plans considering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Impact of individual’s culture and psychosocial environment ✓ Pathophysiology of individual’s GI/digestive condition(s) ✓ Shared decision making regarding various options for nutrition and food choices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accesses resources/clinical guidelines for GI disorders from professional organizations and Academy’s Evidence Analysis Library ● Considers benefit of joining the Dietitians in Medical Nutrition Therapy Dietetic Practice Group (DMNT DPG) that has a sub-unit for digestive diseases and/or obtaining a mentor RDN practicing in GI nutrition ● Recognizes when to make a referral to other providers (eg, activity exceeds individual scope of practice) or local resources (eg, local food banks) ● Identifies evidence-based educational materials to support individuals with GI Disorders ● Participates in quality improvement (QI) projects (eg, collecting and evaluating data) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Current clinical practice guidelines and evolving science ✓ Pharmacology- evaluates appropriateness of medication plans and makes recommendations for adjustments (eg, using organization-approved protocols) ✓ Current technologies (eg, activity and food tracker analysis) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participates in national GI-related organizations, including DMNT DPG ● Adapts or creates peer-reviewed educational materials ● Recognizes QI needs in practice setting and proposes QI projects and research questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Plans to qualify for the CDR Advanced Practice in Clinical Nutrition- RDN-AP certification ● Fosters a person-centered care culture by promoting and educating on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Current clinical practice guidelines and evolving science ✓ Cultural humility and addressing psychosocial environment ✓ Pharmacology options ✓ Shared decision making regarding various options for GI nutrition therapy ✓ Person-centered technology (eg, activity and food trackers and analysis) ● Translates emerging research findings and evidence-based guidelines into personal clinical practice ● Develops or revises protocols, policies, clinical workflows and guidelines, including organization-approved protocols for treating individuals with GI disorders ● Mentors and leads RDNs and other members of the GI care team ● Obtains leadership role in national GI-related organizations ● Designs, initiates, and executes or collaborates and participates in research projects including QI studies

Competent	Proficient	Expert
Actionable Goals to Advance Practice		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Complete Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Certificates of Training: Celiac Disease and Gluten-Related Disorders or Obesity for Pediatrics and Adults ● View GI-related webinars available in the Academy Store (eg, Nutrition Complications of Gastrointestinal Disorders: An Integrative and Multimodal Approach to Treatment) ● Review resources on the Dietitians in Medical Nutrition Therapy (DMNT) DPG website ● Acquire CPEU related to GI disorders ● Identify and engage a GI RDN mentor(s) ● Begin obtaining 2000 hours of supervised, clinical, GI-focused practice with a qualified RDN who has the CSDH or experience with individuals with GI disorders required for CSDH exam eligibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Complete the 2000 hours of GI-focused practice to obtain advanced GI certification, (eg, CDR CSDH) ● Become a Fellow of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (FAND) ● Attend Academy’s Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo (FNCE) GI or population-related sessions ● Attend GI-related conferences and workshops ● Participate in seminar(s) focused on individuals with GI disorders or related topics applicable to patient/client population such as health equity (eg, seminar related to health equity or focused on needs of a specific population [eg, culture, food insecurity]) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Present at GI-related conferences and workshops ● Become a Fellow of an applicable GI practice-related organization ● Volunteer for national organizations (eg, writing or contributing to practice papers and serving on a committee) ● Obtain certification related to population being served, eg, Board Certified Specialist in Digestive Health (CSDH), Certified Specialist in Pediatrics (CSP), Advanced Practice in Clinical Nutrition-(RDN-AP) ● Design, initiate, and execute or collaborate and participate in research projects including QI studies

Roles and responsibilities vary across clinical practice settings and outcome indicators detailed in this figure may not apply to all settings or areas of practice. Thus, RDNs striving to advance their practice and achieving career goals should select approaches that support their current or desired role and responsibilities and enhance knowledge and skills.

Summary

RDNs face complex situations every day, especially when helping patients/clients troubleshoot nutritional challenges with digestive health struggles, whether chronic or acute. Gaining the necessary knowledge, skills, and experience to address the unique needs of each patient/client or situation is essential. Applying applicable scope and standards and evidence-based knowledge appropriately are key to providing safe, timely, effective, efficient, equitable, person-/population-centered, quality care and service. Using a quality and safety approach that is human-centric and incorporates cultural humility, all RDNs are advised to conduct their practice based on the most recent editions of the Code of Ethics for the Nutrition and Dietetics Profession and the Scope and Standards of Practice for RDNs; applicable focus area scope and standards of practice; applicable federal, tribal, state, and local regulations; and facility accreditation standards. This article should be used by RDNs who provide care and/or services to individuals with digestive health issues. The goal of this article is to support RDNs who aspire to or currently work with individuals with digestive diseases or conditions to consistently strive to be solution-oriented clinicians, by improving and appropriately demonstrating competence and value, while considering the benefit of qualifying for the new CDR Certified Specialist in Digestive Health credential.

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