

Pandemic highlights the importance of dietetics

Issued by [Association for Dietetics in South Africa](#)

28 Jul 2020

Dietetics can be traced back to the practice of medicine in ancient Greece where the importance of nutrition and diet to a healthy life was noted in the Hippocratic, as well as even earlier writings. Today, registered dietitians are major role-players across the healthcare systems of modern countries where they are instrumental in preventative healthcare, the treatment of disease and recovery. As diabetes emerges, worldwide, as a top co-morbidity of Covid-19, there's an increasing focus for many of us on our family eating habits and how we can make smart, sustainable improvements to support immunity and overall health through food.



Dr Christine Taljaard-Krugell

“Getting nutrition right is crucial in the fight against the pandemic,” says Dr Christine Taljaard-Krugell, President of ADSA (The Association for Dietetics in South Africa). “Right now across South Africa, critical care dietitians are planning, monitoring and implementing appropriate nutrition regimes for sick and seriously ill patients. While dietitians are playing these vital roles in the multi-disciplinary medical teams caring for Covid-19 patients in hospitals or quarantine, the importance of preventative services is also highlighted now, more than ever before, as we see the risks of under-nourished and over-nourished people in times of Covid-19. Luckily, many dietitian services can pivot to tech platforms such as tele-health and continue no matter what social distancing regulations are in place.”

Why would you need a dietitian?

Some of us are desperate for the Covid-19 pandemic to end so that life ‘can just go back to normal’. However, there are many of us, who while experiencing the disruption with just as much pain, see the opportunity to bring about a new normal. We want to find the ways to forge a stronger and better reality in a post-Covid-19 world. That’s a reality, where not just the world, but we, and our families, are stronger and better as well.

Across the world, pandemic lockdowns have cast what we eat every day, the food available to us, and the food systems that support our lives in our communities, in a somewhat different light. It’s comparable to the experience of our World War 2 generation. Covid-19 has changed our food shopping behaviours, the importance we place on food storage, nutrition knowledge and our family food priorities. It has influenced our attitudes to food waste and even, to producing our own food, with a number of South Africans starting their own food growing efforts. While none of us can go wrong with an increased focus on fresh produce, it is important to remember that the nutritional changes that we make now for a post-Covid-19 world need to be based on evidence; and the world’s foremost evidence-based experts on nutrition are dietitians.

“Public interest in nutrition is always extremely high,” says Taljaard-Krugell. “The pandemic is just highlighting our vulnerabilities, and our opportunities to improve our well-being through nutrition. Covid-19 has put us all on a knife-edge and it is a critical time to sort the facts from the fads. We’re entering global economic recession, and we can’t afford to spend money on unproven products and trendy diets at the expense of the virtues of balanced eating of good food. Dietitians play an incredibly valuable role in cutting through media-driven hype and helping people to focus instead on optimal nutrition.”

Changing perceptions of the dietetic profession

Taljaard-Krugell says, “The role of the nutrition professional in South Africa is currently undergoing transformational processes. In my opinion, one of our major challenges will lie within changing the perspective of the public. For many, thoughts on the scope of the dietitian’s work are narrow where people envisage a job that focuses on making well-off fat people thin. This couldn’t be further from the truth for the majority of a dietitian’s work and from ADSA’s vision – that includes achieving optimal nutrition for all South Africans. ADSA is actively engaging with the public to broaden this frame

of mind, showcasing the varied scope within dietetics which includes the community dietitian, the research and academic dietitians, the hospital dietitian as well as the dietitian in private practice and the dietitians working in the corporate food industry. Our expertise is out there across public and private health sectors, and we are sharing it for optimal nutrition for all South Africans.”

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