



The Burn Unit Clients

Severe burn patients are best cared for in burn units or in intensive care units usually found in large teaching hospitals. Registered Dietitians in these units work closely with doctors, surgeons, nurses and social workers to care for burn patients.

Nutrition is important for the recovery of a person who has been burned because their nutrition needs are very complex. In all of the situations described below, a dietitian will assess, monitor and adjust nutrition frequently as a patient's condition improves or deteriorates:

- The body reacts by increasing production of certain hormones and these hormones cause the body to need more nutrition;
- The normal breakdown of nutrients such as carbohydrates, protein and fats is sometimes altered;
- The body also needs increased nutrition to help the healing process;
- Fluids and electrolytes need close monitoring and adjusting;
- Burn patients are prone to infection; and
- It is not uncommon for burn patients to experience organ failure such as kidney failure or to have a non-functioning gastrointestinal tract.

A dietitian working in a burn unit assesses the nutrients needed to help the recovery of a burn patient. The diets are usually high in protein and calories to help healing. The dietitian will:

- Assess nutrition needs using special equipment and detailed calculations taking into consideration age, weight, body surface burned, presence of infection and other factors;
- Determine how a patient should be fed. Depending on the burn, the patient may not be able to eat or may not be able to use their digestive system. The dietitian must determine the best way of feeding patients whose mouth may be completely burned or whose system has shut down. They may be fed by mouth, intestinal tract, through the veins or a combination thereof;
- Determine appropriate formulas for patients fed directly into the gastrointestinal tract or veins. This special type of feeding using special equipment is referred to as "nutrition support;"
- Provide frequent on-going monitoring of laboratory and other measures to determine the need to revise the nutrient needs and method of feeding; and,
- Work with patients, their families and other health care providers to provide nutrition counseling and to transfer care as patients progress from the burn unit or intensive care unit to their home.

The burn unit dietitian is an essential part of the health care team as nutrition is especially important for the burn patient. Often dietitians working in these specialty areas have advanced their knowledge and skills through experience or through specialized certificate programs.