



Telephone & Web-Based Counselling

Deborah Cohen, MHS, RD
Practice Advisor & Policy Analyst

deborah.cohen@collegeofdietitians.org

Dietetic counselling over the phone and on the internet, through Skype or other web-based platforms, are becoming increasingly popular. They offer simple and effective solutions for clients who have accessibility issues, transportation limitations, who live far away or simply prefer telephone or online services. Some RDs offer these value-added services to their clients who request them. Others work for organizations who offer such services to clients throughout Canada and in other countries. As a result, the College is receiving increasingly more calls from RDs asking for guidance about telephone and web-based counselling.

Currently, the College does not have specific standards or policies surrounding telephone or web-based counselling. However, principles of safe, ethical and competent dietetic practice still apply to counselling over the phone and the web.

EXERCISE PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT

RDs need to determine when it is and when it is not appropriate to offer telephone or web-based counselling. There may be some instances when it would benefit a client to see the RD in-person, at least once, to establish rapport. In some cases, this may not be possible and the only way for a client to have access to RD services might be by phone or online.

With telephone or web-based counselling, RDs normally rely on self-reported information from the client and need to exercise the same professional judgment when conducting an assessment online as they would in-person. Services offered via Skype or some other web-based platforms, would help an RD address observable concerns (e.g. weight loss/gain, fluid retention, skin integrity, etc.).

Need to Know

When considering telephone or web-based counselling:

- Establish whether there is a client need for telephone or web-based counselling;
- Exercise the same professional judgment and questioning as when seeing a client in-person;
- Ensure client consent for collecting, using and disclosing personal health information as well as for providing treatment via telephone or web-based counselling;
- Implement measures that protect the privacy and confidentiality of clients;
- Comply with the College's record keeping requirements;
- Identify and comply with any restrictions, including the licensing required, surrounding telephone or web-based counselling in the province or country in which the client resides;
- Be transparent with the client about where you are registered as an RD; and
- Comply with the College's mandatory requirement for liability insurance.

OBTAIN INFORMED CONSENT

The same legal requirements for obtaining informed consent for dietetic services apply to telephone and web-based counselling. Dietitians must obtain consent for:

- **Collecting, using and disclosing personal health information:** RDs must disclose the reasons for collecting, using and disclosing personal health information.
- **Transmitting personal health information online:** Make sure that clients understand the security issues of transmitting personal health information over the phone

and the internet so that they can provide knowledgeable consent. Explain the security issues surrounding communication via the internet and the measures you will be taking to protect their personal health information. If the client consents, you may proceed accordingly.

- **Treatment via telephone or web-based counselling:** Make sure that clients understand the process you will be using for a telephone or online assessment and how the treatment proposed will be communicated for informed consent.

ENSURE PRIVACY OF CLIENT HEALTH INFORMATION

Implement reasonable measures to protect client privacy when providing dietetic services via telephone or internet. For example, to maintain privacy, you may want to make sure clients consent to you leaving messages about their healthcare on shared voice mail.

Both RDs and clients should recognize that any information relayed through the internet is never 100% secure. The use of unique password logins for online counselling is a best practice for preserving privacy.

DOCUMENTATION AND RECORD KEEPING

Professional record keeping obligations do not change with telephone or web-based counselling. All documentation of dietetic services must comply with the College's record keeping requirements. Clearly document any telephone or web-based counselling in the client health record. When providing telephone or web-based dietetic services to clients who receive health care in another facility, establish how client health records will be accessed and how remote services will be documented.

OUT-OF-PROVINCE COUNSELLING

In Canada, the dietetic profession is regulated provincially. In order to practise the profession, use the RD title and call

yourself a dietitian in Ontario, you must be registered with College of Dietitians of Ontario. College members who wish to provide services outside the province would need to contact the regulatory body for the dietetic profession in the jurisdiction where the client resides to find out if there are any restrictions. In some cases, dietitians must be licensed with the regulatory body where the client resides in order to provide them with telephone or web-based counselling, even if they are already registered with another province.

LIABILITY INSURANCE

It is a mandatory requirement for RDs registered with the College to hold professional liability insurance when practicing the profession. For more information refer to the following article:

<https://www.collegeofdietitians.org/Resources/Professional-Practice/Liability-Insurance/Important-Change-to-By-Law-5-Professional-Liability.aspx>

RDs should contact the broker/insurance company who provides their professional liability insurance policy to determine if their coverage includes telephone and/or web-based nutrition counselling. They should also verify whether their policy coverage is specific to Ontario, Canada or whether it also covers dietetic practice internationally.

For any further questions surrounding RDs providing telephone or web-based counselling, please contact the College's Practice Advisory Service:

Practice Advisory Service
416-598-1725/1-800-668-4990, ext. 397
practiceadvisor@collegeofdietitians.org