

# healthy living

Your weekly guide to wellness

## Dial-In for Weight Loss

### From high-tech "diet" phones to telephone wellness coaches, more people are using cell phones to get the 4-1-1 on their health

By Anna T. Hirsh  
CTW Features

We all know that cell phones help us to keep in touch with friends and family, come in handy if we get in a car accident and are often mobile entertainment systems, internet modems and guides. But did you know that now your cell phone can also connect you with your health and weight loss goals?

No, you don't switch your cell to vibrate mode and strap it to your stomach like the Ab Belt. Today there are phones with functions specifically designed to help you drop pounds instead of calls.

"One of the biggest challenges for those trying to change their eating habits is to know what they are doing right and where they may need to improve, as well as staying motivated along the way," says Sebastian Tanguay, vice president of sales and marketing for Myca, Quebec City, Canada, maker of the Food Phone, a camera-phone, food-journaling and video-feedback service. Dieters who pay a monthly fee can use their Food Phone to snap a picture of what they ate/plan to eat and then send those pictures to dietitians who are available 24-hours-a-day. The experts then send back an instant "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" as well as related nutritional advice. Actually seeing the food allows the coach to make more accurate judgments about a client's diet, while the "live" feedback enables the dieter to have a qualified nutritionist virtually anytime, anywhere.

Nokia and Siemens also offer phones with various fitness-oriented services, including calorie counters, BMI calculators, heart rate monitors and fitness planners, and Samsung will soon release a phone that lets you measure body fat percentages quicker than it takes to dial for a pizza.

Fortunately for cell-savvy dieters, the science appears to back up this mobile method of weight management. Dr. Jennifer Shapiro, Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of Psychiatry, Chapel Hill, N.C., and colleagues have been studying the ways in which text messaging can help keep people on track with their goals for healthy eating. "Self-monitoring, or writing things down, is one of the most important ingredients when trying to change a behavior," says Shapiro. "But people are currently using technology (computers, phones, PDAs) more frequently than paper diaries."

Shapiro worked with children aged 5-13 and their parents to modify three specific behaviors associated with health (increasing physical activity, decreasing television/video time and decreasing sugar-sweetened beverages) for eight weeks. Some families were asked to self-monitor daily via paper diaries, while the others were asked to send a daily text message after which they would receive a feedback message based on how close they were to achieving the recommended goals.

"We found that the children in the text messaging group enjoyed using the mobile phones, wanted to be in the mobile phone group and remained in the study longer than those in the paper diary group," says Shapiro. Consequently those children in the texting group had more success than those in the paper diary group.

But if you're looking for a voice on the other end of the line, a personal phone coach may be the route for you. Although you do receive counsel and instruction, the goal of a phone coach is to help make the individual responsible for their own health.

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"The average person today is overscheduled and disconnected," says Tiffany Crate, M.S., director of TLC Fitness Consulting and a Master Fitness By Phone® coach. "Many people relinquish their mind-body connection as they hurry through their busy days, overextending themselves and delegating tasks to others."

This tendency includes abdicating personal responsibility for one's own health to diet plans and personal trainers. "We frequently witness personal trainers keeping all the documentation while the client is directed around the gym like a robot," says Crate. "This exacerbates the root of their problem, which is wanting someone else to 'fix' a weight problem and lack of fitness without having to pay attention or be mindful themselves...Fitness By Phone coaching, which boasts a 75-90-percent adherence rate, teaches people the tools necessary to make choices and decisions for themselves."

Gillian Hood-Gabrielson, MS, ACSM, founder and president of Healthier Outcomes, Paradise, Calif., a customized fitness and intuitive eating program, has done plenty of face-to-face fitness training, but all of her intuitive-eating coaching is done exclusively over the phone in weekly hour-long sessions. Her clients send in food diaries and then they discuss what issues came up during the week.

"The heart of each session is discussing some particular situation or obstacle and figuring out how to deal with it better the next time," says Hood-Gabrielson. "Rather than me talking at them and telling them what to do, they are learning how to reach their goals on their own...Talking on the phone provides a sort of protection which allows people to be really upfront and completely honest, and they don't feel like they're being judged for the way they look."

Phone coaching can also be done on a traditional landline. Cell phones, however, enable the coaches to easily email photo illustrations of exercises and other educational documents. Crate points out that many of her clients tend to travel a lot and rely on a cell phone for their internet connection. "If I wanted to take a photo of myself performing an exercise with proper technique," says Crate, "I can do that and get it to my client right away."

When it comes to your health and well-being, it's definitely worth the cell minutes to call and find out more.