

Dieting the digital way

A camera phone or handheld organizer helps ease the drudgery of calorie-counting

June 20, 2006

It's no secret that the fad diet is both the friend and foe of the weight-loss set. From the Atkins diet to the South Beach diet to that old classic, the grapefruit diet, quick fixes for weight loss are irresistible and around every corner.

But as most dietitians will tell you, the only nearly foolproof way to drop the pounds is the time-tested method of calorie-counting. Recording every bite of pizza, nibble of Rocky Road and dollop of whipped cream in a food log, they say, is a dieter's best bet.

Now, many dieters are finding there's an update to that old-fashioned technique: an array of convenient, portable, high-tech ways to help them document their dessert (or lack thereof).

Among these new toys is MyFoodPhone, a service offered through Sprint that allows dieters to photograph meals and snacks with their camera phone before they eat, then instantly upload the pictures to their online MyFood-Phone account. Every two weeks a "nutritional adviser" checks the account and delivers feedback via the Web about portion sizes, nutritional content and general eating habits in the form of a video clip or notes.

Though the service, which costs \$9.99 per month in addition to the cost of a user's existing phone plan, has been around since late 2004, its Quebec-based distributor only established a partnership with Sprint in the United States in February. But though MyFoodPhone, according to a spokesman for the company, is the first service to use mobile phone cameras as a diet aid, it's just the latest addition to a growing number of mobile services that offer food logging and nutritional encyclopedias.

A stalwart helps lead the way

Weight Watchers was in the forefront of the trend, offering a version of its point-tracking system for use on Palm Inc. handheld devices as early as late 2004, through a service called Weight Watchers "On-the-Go."

"We surveyed our customers, and they made clear that they [wanted to] carry something with them to make smart choices," says Scott Parlee, director of product development for WeightWatchers.com. On-the-Go contains a full list of point values for various foods as well as for products at dining establishments like Subway, Starbucks and Cold Stone Creamery.

And though the company doesn't release user data, it says On-the-Go's success has sparked plans to develop applications for alternative technologies in the near future.

In addition to the Weight Watchers application, Palm also hosts "Diet & Exercise Assistant" (\$19.99 for a onetime download), one of the company's most popular downloadable applications, which calculates a daily food budget in addition to allowing users to track their food intake.

And MyFoodPhone isn't the only service to seize upon the popularity of downloadable software for cell phones.

VerizonWireless hosts two different applications, Diet Fitness Diary (\$1.99 per month) and Diet TinyAssist (\$5.49 for a onetime download), both of which allow users to track every last cheese puff they pop in their mouths through encyclopedic databases of nutritional information.

On the downside

Although the latest mobile diet devices offer certain obvious advantages, namely convenience, low cost relative to personal nutrition counseling and the ability to record reams of information, they're not entirely worry-free. Some nutritionists and dietitians have mixed reactions to the services and say there may be some hidden drawbacks to these tools.

Most pressing is the health risk associated with programs that need to be self-administered and don't involve direct contact with a certified nutritionist, nurse or doctor. (Though the MyFoodPhone nutritional advisers are trained by the company in portion control and general nutrition information, they aren't certified nutritionists.)

As a result, some experts say the programs should be supplemented with professional care. "As people lose weight, some conditions, such as diabetes, can be affected by dieting and may require a diet that's tailored to them," says Emily Marcus, a nutritionist at the North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System's Center for Weight Management in New Hyde Park.

Marcus says a handful of her patients have inquired about the new applications. "Before anyone starts any type of weight loss program, they should visit their physician," she advises.

The emotional component

But the less obvious pitfall of such programs is that they ignore what for many people is a crucial component of dropping pounds: overcoming the emotional and mental barriers to success. "Discussing food issues and relationships with food is a challenge and an intimate thing," says Rebecca Appleman, a nutritionist with Joy Bauer Nutrition in Manhattan, "so sometimes there's a benefit to speaking to a real human being, face-to-face."

Though Appleman endorses keeping a detailed food record, she says that the emotional components of dieting can prevent clients from reaching their goals just as much as their portion control or overall calorie consumption may influence their success. "My clients can discuss other behavior or other choices that might be affecting their nutrition," she says. "I'm not sure they're getting that supervision with these services."

CALORIE CONFUSION

Despite widespread publicity concerning the serious health risks posed by obesity, diabetes and other weight-related medical issues, a recent study shows that most people are still confused about their recommended daily calorie consumption.

Nearly nine out of 10 Americans cannot accurately estimate how many calories they should eat every day, according to a study by the Washington, D.C.-based International Food Information Council Foundation, conducted in November 2005 and released earlier this year.

The study, which surveyed 1,000 people over the age of 18 and was conducted online, found that 79 percent of the people who responded to questions about the proper number of calories needed for a person of his or her age, weight and height answered incorrectly.

And less than one-third of the respondents agreed that "calories in general are what cause weight gain [i.e. all calories are the same]," with 26 percent choosing calories from fats as the quickest way to pack on the pounds.

Researchers found this data particularly surprising given the additional finding that most participants (67 percent) reported checking the caloric content listing on the Nutrition Facts Panel when purchasing foods.

The foundation plans to conduct updates to its research every one or two years.

Count calories

Recommended daily caloric intake for moderately active individuals.

Children

Ages 2-3 1,000-1,400

Females

Ages 4-8 1,400-1,600

Ages 9-13 1,600-2,000

Ages 14-18 2,000

Ages 19-30 2,000-2,200

Ages 31-50 2,000

Ages 51+ 1,800

Males

Ages 4-8 1,400-1,600

Ages 9-13 1,800-2,000

Ages 14-18 2,400-2,800

Ages 19-30 2,600-2,800

Ages 31-50 2,400-2,600

Ages 51+ 2,200-2,400

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES