



Put down the fork: your dietician's on the phone

Tele-dieting is the newest thing on your cell. Food-conscious technophiles can phone in photos of every meal, and get feedback from eating coach

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Jack Lavoie might have looked like just another annoying restaurant patron flipping out his cellphone in the middle of dinner. But like thousands of Canadians, Lavoie has been trying to lose weight, and his phone has been his "virtual" diet coach.

The musician and landscaper is one of the first health conscious technophiles to try MyFoodPhone: a Canadian-designed camera phone embedded with software that forwards pictures of its owner's meals to a registered dietician.

During testing of MyFoodPhone this winter at the Universite Laval, in Quebec City, Lavoie volunteered to upload images of everything he ate to a personal Web page at www.myfoodphone.com.

Once a week for two months, he received a 90-second video clip response from "Caroline," a dietician in private practice, offering feedback on his food choices and tips for improvement.

MyFoodPhone, the brainchild of Quebec City-based NATS Inc., has been offered in New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut since February, and is to make its Canadian debut this summer.

"It's like you get a video commentary of your week in the food world. (Caroline) would tell you, 'You're not eating enough vegetables,' or 'Don't forget to drink your water.' She'd direct you along the six or seven main food types," Lavoie said. "You really become sensitive to what you're putting in your body."

At \$150 U.S. a month, plus the cost of the phone, the service is still cheaper and more efficient than booking weekly appointments with a dietician or fitness coach, its creators say.

With no advertising other than word-of-mouth, about 150 residents of the tri-state area have signed up to take virtual consultations from 50 dieticians.

And MyFoodPhone is only the latest of a slew of software-laden cellphones, PDAs

and other Web-enabled diet aids aimed at helping people take control over their weight loss as never before.

"Tele-dieting" technology and services represent an expanding slice of a weight-loss market worth more than \$240 billion U.S. globally, according to the Institute of Food Technologists.

It's an opportunity projected by Marketdata to reach \$61 billion in the United States alone by 2008.

Among newly released diet novelties is Powerseed, a pod-shaped gadget that acts as a sort of Pavlovian egg timer, encouraging dieters to chew their food slowly by discreetly beeping or flashing a green light every 30 seconds when it's time to take a bite.

Hundreds of diet and exercise software programs are becoming available for hand-held PDAs. They include versions of the popular Atkins, Keyoe, South Beach, and WeightWatchers diets released this winter that have been adapted for palmOne Zire, Treo and Tungsten hand-helds.

The advantage of MyFoodPhone is that photographing meals and letting a professional score the results may be a more convenient, authoritative way to monitor eating than relying on written self-examination, said Marc Onigman, vice-president of business development for NATS Inc.

Mayo Clinic researchers are discussing a study that would try to standardize measurements of food portion sizes based on photos taken with MyFoodPhone, Onigman said.

"If people knew what a 'portion' was, they wouldn't need a nutritionist in the first place," he said. "They see MyFoodPhone as a way of cutting to the chase real fast."

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