

My Food Phone

Jennifer Aniston uses the Zone. Kirstie Alley prefers Jenny Craig. Chuck Norris likes the Total Gym. And the Clintons? The South Beach Diet. From special foods to complicated workout regimens, celebrities and civilians alike are constantly on the hunt for the best solutions to their fitness needs. Now, thanks to a program that fuses technology with nutrition, the search could be over.

Introducing MyFoodPhone, a service that replaces the typical food journal with a camera phone. The world's first system to link individuals with their own nutritional coaches, MyFoodPhone is designed to help customers make healthier choices through the tracking of their daily food intake - combined with customized advice. The program launched in May 2006 on Sprint, and other carriers are set to offer the feature within the next few months.

"This is a convenient way to monitor what you eat without having to write it down in a journal," says Emmy Anderson, Sprint spokesperson. "It provides motivation to eat healthy with encouragement and the ability to track progress."

The concept is simple. Customers take pictures of the food they eat during meals or snacks, and email those pictures to the MyFoodPhone website. A nutritional advisor then provides biweekly feedback (that is videotaped and accompanied by other relevant health videos) based on the client's eating habits. Advisors are not nutritionists, but they are trained by registered dietitians to identify food and give nutritional counseling. There are no complex rules to follow, foods to avoid or specific vitamins and nutrients to add up. All a customer has to do is take a picture and punch in some specifics about their meal on their myfoodphone.com homepage.

The program also teaches users how to measure their food portions more accurately than they may have done in the past. This is an attempt to give users a grasp on what they are actually eating, says MyFoodPhone spokesperson Marc Onigman, who is hopeful that this type of knowledge will encourage honest reporting. After all, the act of taking pictures does not burn fat by itself, even though it engages users in a visual quantitative way. Clients who really want to change need to eat healthier and exercise.

"The most powerful thing I've found is that it really puts the work on the user. You could eat a pizza and take a picture of a salad and no one will know except you. The advisors are there to provide encouragement and suggestions, but in the end it's up to you to make the necessary adjustments," he says. "The way we eat is mindless. We're trying to make it more mindful with MyFoodPhone."

Because cell phones are always with you, they provide a unique outlet for health monitoring, and are already serving as telemedicine hubs for the elderly and those with severe medical conditions. Lifestyle and fitness support is a logical next step for this now pervasive technology. In fact, MyFoodPhone is already working on other ways to use their service in the

lifestyle category, including the development of a golf phone that connects golfers to golf pros via their camera phone. Onigman says that it is this type of customized attention that helps users commit to improvement, and the same goes for the journey toward better eating habits.

"There are strong forces out there working against folks that want to eat right," he says. "If you take control of the problem, with a little help from tools like ours, you may actually be able to improve your lifestyle and health. A picture is worth 1000 calories."