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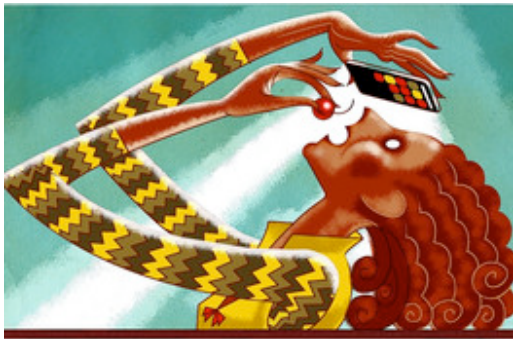
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Calorie Trackers: When a Kati Roll Is Like a Burrito

By ALINA DIZIK

Eating healthy can often feel like a chore. Many diet and nutrition experts say one of the best ways to improve your daily diet is to keep tabs on food intake. Online calorie trackers can simplify the job with point-and-click-options.



Douglas Jones

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Calorie-counting websites have long been common, but in recent years the sites have ramped up their food databases and added better tools to make it less tedious to monitor what you eat. In addition to calories, some websites let individuals know what's on their plates in terms of cholesterol, carbs and other nutrients.

While companies are careful not to promote scientifically unproven information, the trackers' nutrition and exercise data is mostly reliable for the average user, says Joanne Kouba, a registered dietitian and assistant professor who teaches at Loyola University's dietetics education program in Chicago. "What you're getting from any of these is a guesstimation," Ms. Kouba says, but adds that steady use can yield more accurate results.

"These programs could be very helpful for a lot of people," says Marjorie Nolan, an American Dietetic Association spokeswoman. "But they are only as good as the information that they are inputting."

Personal Information

We tested four sites by going online and logging our daily food intake for a week. (Most sites offer some mobile versions.) To get started, we answered questions about our height, weight, daily activity level and how many pounds we wanted to shed. We asked Ms. Kouba to look over the information we got from the sites to see if it was on track with dietitians' advice.

Overall, we found the sites' data useful and a nice wake-up call for the poor nutritional quality of some of our meals. We were surprised our fat consumption was 50% of our daily intake on several days. The sites also pointed out the differences in what we consumed on the weekends compared to the rest of the week.

The sites have features beyond calorie-counting for those who want to spend more than a few minutes a day tracking their every move: from water intake to calculating the calories burned on sexual activity. Justin Yandell, founder of MyFoodDiary.com, says after weeks of use, many people become interested in knowing metrics far beyond their caloric intake. "People who never cared about fiber suddenly feel that they are not getting enough," says Mr. Yandell.

It was difficult to gauge serving size especially when we were eating at home or at restaurants that weren't required to post calories. Based on seeing our weekly menu and the calorie totals, Ms. Kouba says MyFoodDiary.com and MyNetDiary.com were the most precise, but adds that accuracy varies by an individual's food choices. CalorieKing.com was our favorite site for browsing additional info about healthy eating. The more we used the sites the easier it became to log food intake because all have the capability to store frequently consumed meals.

When it came to calorie counting, the sites listed similar numbers for popular supermarket and restaurant brands and all showed calories, fat, carbs, protein, fiber as well as sugars and cholesterol.

A Slice of Bread

Serving sizes, however, varied among the sites. One site would list the actual size of a slice of bread in ounces, while another would list it as just one serving of carbs. Calorie listings for generic food or items added by site contributors also varied. On a sample day, which included fresh vegetable juice, restaurant tacos and a supermarket granola bar, the sites' calorie totals came within 311 calories of each other. Where they differed most was in providing nutrition information beyond brand names and the ease in inputting meals.

At CalorieKing.com, which has an easy-to-use food and exercise diary, we searched for each item and then dragged it to our calendar in the site. Most of our items popped up right away but we spent more time than expected entering the ingredients of a sandwich. (The site does allow user to save items in favorites for future reference.) Unusual menu items like a kati roll from an Indian restaurant had to be logged to what we figured was its nearest equivalent on the site: a burrito. Chief Executive Keith McGuinness says users are encouraged to substitute similar foods if an item isn't in the database and they don't know the calorie count themselves.

We could set targets for calories, fat and cholesterol levels. While the site didn't show vitamin intake, we could see a weekly average of minerals consumed. After a week, we discovered we consumed 1,328 calories a day with 35% of our daily diet in fat, which the sites point out is above the 20% to 30% range recommended for our body. (The sites recommended an average of 1,200 calories for weight loss.) One surprise: A Thai curry lunch we thought was fairly healthy clocked in at over 1,000 calories.

At MyFoodDiary.com, a search bar let us add each item, but we had to click on an item to see the nutrition label, which then gave us the calorie information. (At the other sites, calorie counts appeared after we selected the items.) The database was thorough but we found it time-consuming to sort through pages of similar results to log a piece of French bread. The daily reports, showing totals of vitamins, fats and other metrics, were useful and easier to understand than other sites' reports. Pointers noting our healthy and unhealthy eating habits, such as a high sodium intake, and how many calories we could consume to lose weight motivated us to keep logging. The reports color-coded meals' data to show how healthy (or unhealthy) they were.

Fast to Use

MyNetDiary.com was the quickest to use because it guesses what users are searching for as they start to type. Many of the specific foods we ate (like Japanese Kani salad) were listed thanks to 300,000 contributions from the site's community. Most of the food on our daily log was from contributors. (The other sites let users contribute as well.) We especially liked that our food diary could track things like caffeine and folate. Charts tracking eating patterns were sometimes difficult to understand and didn't have enough detailed information.

The free MyFitnessPal.com site had a good food database (including hard-to-find grilled eggplant) and the fewest bells and whistles, which made the food diary simple to understand. Daily food intake was clearly conveyed in charts but long-term nutrition reports couldn't track multiple nutrients at the same time. Co-founder Mike Lee says they are working to improve this feature. A daily metric pointed out how much weight we would lose or gain if we consumed that same amount of calories for five weeks, which kept us motivated to eat healthy. Ms. Kouba pointed out on some days MyFitnessPal may have overestimated calorie totals.

Here's how four online calorie trackers compare:

WEBSITE	MONTHLY COST	APPS	FEATURES	COMMENT
CalorieKing.com	\$12 ; free food database available.	Mobile app at gomeals.com.	Exercise log, able to set nutrition targets.	Easy to use and thorough list, though some ethnic foods not available. Great for browsing for additional info about healthy eating.
MyFoodDiary.com	\$9	Mobile app.	Easy to read graphs, nutrition labels.	Good quality database, searching can take time. To get an item's calorie count, you have to click on it to get its nutritional information label.
MyNetDiary.com	\$9 (apps included). Free option available, but doesn't provide a daily food analysis.	iPhone, Android, BlackBerry, iPad.	Can customize to track nutrients, exercise tracking.	Excellent, quick food input, large community database. As-you-type search feature guesses the item you want to select.
MyFitnessPal.com	Free	iPhone, Android, BlackBerry.	Recipe builder, active online community.	Easy-to-use, some irrelevant search results. Few bells and whistles made the information from the food diary easy to understand.

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