

Should I Use a Calorie Counting App?

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

The pros and cons of technology to track your food:

Thousands of people are using phone apps, website programs and other technology devices to track calories consumed and calories burned from activity in an attempt to lose weight or change their habits. But are they helpful?

What are the potential benefits of calorie counting apps?

As with most things in our life, what we focus on expands so if you are overweight and trying to lose weight, tracking your calorie intake may help. Logging your food intake helps to bring about awareness of what and how much you are eating. Tracking your calorie intake may also help you to boost your knowledge about which foods are low and high in energy and give you a sense of calories burned during exercise.



What are the potential issues of calorie counting apps?

There are many reasons I am not a supporter of calorie counting apps:

1. Dieting Headspace

Calorie counting puts you in a dieting headspace that you are only “allowed” a certain amount of food and judges your day as good or bad. Research shows that feeling restricted often leads to overcompensation since psychologically we all want what we can’t have.

2. Doesn’t consider other nutrients

Calorie counting categorizes a food by one ingredient rather than the full package of essential nutrients we need such as carbohydrate, protein, fats, vitamins, minerals and fibre. When a food is judged based on calories alone a low calorie foods such as diet sugar-free candy might be considered good while a nutrient dense food such as nuts, olive oil or avocado can be considered the enemy.

3. Oversimplified calorie and weight goals

Calorie tracking apps provide you with set calorie goals and weight suggestions. A computer can never know precisely how much you “should” eat as this is highly individual and dependent on a wide range of things. A computer can’t also know what you “should” weigh. Your best weight is not simply determined by a weight chart or calculating your BMI (body mass intake). Your best weight is individual and determined by our genetics, family history, nutrition, exercise, body composition, sleep/stress and more. You are not a robot, we are all different.

4. Permission to eat is based on exercise





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Many calorie counting apps often tie how much you get to eat based on how much exercise you did today. Exercise should never be the reason you are “allowed” to eat more. Our intuitive hunger patterns change every day and sometimes you may require more food on a non-active day than on a highly active day when your body is recovering.

5. Database inaccuracies

Calorie tracking apps use computer databases of foods and these can be inaccurate and vary based on location and method of analysis. There is also the issue of vague database items such as “a slice of bread” which could range for 60 – 150 calories or a “medium banana” which could be interpreted to mean very different numbers.

What can I do instead of using a calorie counting app?

Since awareness of your habits is indeed an important part of lifestyle change and weight management if you are currently using an app and find this helpful just be aware of some of the pitfalls above and consider using this only for a short period of time.

I am personally a much bigger fan of a pen and paper to journal. There is not only an overwhelming amount of research in the health and weight loss industry, but there are a large number of experts in personal development and business success that preach about the benefit of keeping a journal. Journaling helps you become aware of your patterns and ultimately what and how to change for the better. The simple act of writing down what you eat, your physical activity patterns, goals and reflections encourages you to change your behavior for good and achieve success. It is also much less neurotic than crunching numbers.

What kind of journal is best?

Your journal can be very simple or comprehensive depending on what works for you. A simple form of journaling is by using a weekly yellow sticky note that lists a table with 3 rows for 3 goals and 7 columns for the days of the week. You can give yourself a checkmark beside days you accomplished the goal and provide yourself with a score at the end of the week.

A more detailed form of journaling could involve recording some goals, your activity and hours of sleep along with a food journal that details what, when, where and most importantly WHY you were eating (true hunger or habit or emotional hunger?)

Andrea Holwegner, known as the Chocoholic Dietitian, is founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting Inc., a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a media expert for the Dietitians of Canada. For nutrition counselling information and to sign up for a free monthly newsletter loaded with nutrition tips, recipes and more visit www.healthstandnutrition.com. Twitter @chocoholicRD.

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