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Losing Digitally: The Skinny on Weight-Loss Apps

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[Apr 13, 2012](#) Posted by [Staff Writers](#)



Forget food journals or fitness logs. These days, it’s weight management apps that are changing the way people keep track of what they eat — and they’re helping

them lose weight in the process too.

“Just the act of writing something down in a spreadsheet is old-school,” said [Sarah Krieger](#), a registered dietician and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. “This is the new way to keep track of your food.”

Since the first iPhone and Android smartphones debuted about five years ago, apps have exploded. There are now thousands of health-oriented apps from which to choose, hundreds of which are devoted to weight management, from leaders like Lose It! and MyFitnessPal, to long-standing weight-loss programs like the Weight Watchers’ mobile app, to the American Heart Association’s [Weigh What Matters](#) app. But though the selection is wide and varied, they all have basically the same premise — you have a set calorie goal, and you keep track of what you eat until you reach that goal. It’s all based on the standard weight-loss premise that you shed pounds by burning more calories than you consume.

Now, of course, the question is whether these apps work. Research is still nascent, but according to an [American Heart Association study](#) released last month, overweight and obese adults using an electronic device that provided daily messages did better at staying on diet and exercise programs than those who did not use an app. A [study](#) published in the *Journal of Translational Behavioral Medicine* last year found that these apps overwhelmingly follow proven weight-loss methods, too. The researchers evaluated more than 204 weight loss-related apps available in the iTunes store in September 2009, based on 13 criteria established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture for weight-loss programs.

The criteria included whether the app assessed weight, had a food diary component, and encouraged eating fruits and vegetables, physical activity, drinking water over juice or soda, and a balance between calories consumed and calories burned. Additionally, ideal programs would encourage a weight loss of 1-2 pounds per week. Ultimately, the study found that a quarter of the apps met three or four of the criteria, 30% had two, a quarter had one good component, and only 6% met none of the criteria. The worst offenders were apps like one that recommended putting your vibrating phone on your stomach to “shake apart” fat cells.

Since there can be some bad eggs in the bunch, one company is looking to set a standard for health-care apps across the board. Happitque, an app store developed by health care professionals, is in the process of [creating a certification program](#) that would help the health care community determine which of the thousands of health-related apps are technically sound. The program is expected to be available later this year.

Until that point, Krieger is all for people using calorie-counting apps as a weight-loss method.

“When you’re accountable [to] yourself [about] what you eat, you’re one step closer to your goal,” she said. “Who wants to write down they ate 10 cookies? It gets you in the process of thinking about how much you’re actually eating.”

Krieger recommends calorie-counting apps that are free, have tutorials so you can get the most out of it, have a large food database, and count backwards from your overall caloric allotment, so you know

how much you have remaining. If you have a more specific goal than just losing weight, such as lowering your cholesterol or watching sodium intake, you'll be better off with an app that also measures those nutrients. Since these apps may also include features like social media components, email alerts, and exercise trackers, as well as all have their unique visuals and functionalities, it really comes down to personal choice, said Krieger.

"There's a huge variety out there, so you should see which ones you like best," said Krieger. "It's all the same info at the end of the day."

Which weight-loss apps are the best?

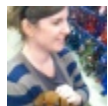
With hundreds of weight management apps to choose from, it can be a bit daunting to find the best one that works for you. Here are a few that registered dietician Sarah Krieger recommends and their main features:

- [MyFitnessPal](#). Tracks both food and fitness goals to help you lose weight. Boasts a large food database, too, as well as a social media component.
- [SparkPeople](#). Fitness and food tracker for people looking to lose a half-pound to two pounds per week or to maintain weight.
- [Calorie Counter](#). Tracks food, exercise, weight, and all the nutrients listed on a Nutrition Facts label. Also includes healthy recipes.
- [Daily Burn](#). Keep track of calories consumed and track workouts to see how much energy is burned.
- [Livestrong](#). The only paid app out of the bunch here (\$2.99), it's another food and fitness diary designed to help you achieve your diet and nutrition goals, whether that means losing, maintaining, or gaining weight.

– Meredith Deliso, CMN Staff Writer

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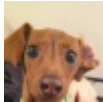



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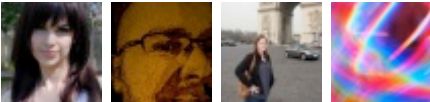
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