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Food Scales That Measure Up

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It's that time of year again.

With holiday eating mostly behind and New Year's approaching, it's time to resolve to eat healthy and lose weight. To help in that quest, retailers are stocking plenty of food scales. Several new electronic models go beyond weighing portion size: They calculate nutritional information like calories, carbohydrates, sodium and fiber, based on an internal database of foods from acorn squash (baked) to zucchini (raw). A year ago, manufacturer Salter introduced the Nutri-Weigh Dietary Scale, with details on 1,440 foods. Maker Escali says sales of its Cibo scale, which was redesigned for 2006 and has nutrition data for 999 foods, rose 60% in the last year.

[We shopped online](#) for popular digital models -- both with and without nutritional data -- and tested five with the help of **Lisa R. Young**, a registered dietician in New York and author of "*The Portion Teller Plan*." On each, we weighed a sesame bagel, three ounces of uncooked skate, a piece of provolone cheese and a raw egg. While they all seemed to weigh food accurately, the most complex models were at times clumsy and unintuitive.

The first three offered nutritional data. All came up with roughly the same calorie counts for the same items -- first, you have to indicate the type of food by scrolling through a menu or typing in a code (a booklet is provided). The \$90 Soehnle Food Control Electronic Kitchen Scale, from Kitchen Universe, had more than two dozen large buttons and came with a code chart listing 400 foods. We found one hole: Bagels weren't on the chart. And despite the large display, only one chunk of nutritional data appears at a time, meaning you have to push separate buttons to get the rundown on calories, fat and the rest.

Another button-heavy model was the Salter Nutri-Weigh, for \$100 from Chef's Resource. It had the most features of all, including a 1,440-food database with 10 nutritional data points each, like total sugars and protein. It can also record total daily intake. However, we found it too complicated. You have to type in the name of each food on a cellphone-like keypad, with three letters to a key. When we typed in "egg," the first listing was for egg bread -- and we had to scroll down 10 items before we got to raw egg.

Of the data-rich scales, we found the Escali Cibo, for \$60 from Cooking.com, the easiest to figure out. It had four pages of simple instructions, plus a manual of food codes. (You just type the three-number code into the scale.) However, the itchy-bitsy buttons were hard to push, and like the Soehnle, nutrition figures are displayed one piece at a time.

11 Pounds of Hamburger

Overall, we found the nutritional models too intimidating for home use -- even **Dr. Young**, who uses food scales on a regular basis, struggled using them. Another problem is that they don't take into account preparation. Six ounces of raw tilapia contains around 160 calories, but that doesn't count whether it's cooked plain or in butter. "Food scales shouldn't be used for anything other than measuring portions," **Dr. Young** said.

The two plain-vanilla weighing scales we ordered could also weigh more food at a time -- up to 11 pounds, nearly double the capacity of the nutritional scales. (Granted, that's a lot of hamburger.) The Polder Digital Food Scale was small and portable, with just two buttons: one for power and one for adding and weighing -- say, if you want to place a bowl on top, zero out the weight, and add in eight ounces of oatmeal. (All five scales had the same feature.) On the downside, the smooth surface was a little unsteady. The egg rolled right off, but we managed to catch it before it cracked. At \$40 from Kitchen Kapers, it's Best Value.

Cuisinart's Precision Electronic Scale, for \$60 from the manufacturer's site, wins Best Overall for its simplicity, accuracy and modesty. It had three large buttons (power, add and weigh, and pounds/kilograms) and the slightly textured surface held on to our egg. "This scale only claims to do one thing, and it does it well," **Dr. Young** said. It won't teach you correct portion sizes -- you'll need a nutritionist or health book for that -- but it's a start.

STORE/PRICE/PHONE	QUALITY	SHIPPING COST/TIME	RETURN POLICY	PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE	COMMENT
Cuisinart Precision Electronic Scale, \$59.95 800-211-9604 cuisinart.com	Best Overall. Simple, three-button scale was easy to use. Weighs up to 11 pounds of food, in ¼-oz. increments.	We paid \$16.35 for three-day shipping, and the scale arrived on time.	Products can be returned for refund or exchange within 30 days. Customer pays return shipping.	Customer service was friendly on the phone, but the Web site doesn't explain shipping/return policies.	Of the three scales sold on the site, this is the only digital model. Company says it's the most popular. Requires one nine-volt battery.
Kitchen Kapers Polder Digital Food Scale \$39.99 800-455-5567 kitchenkapers.com	Best Value. Scale had a somewhat slick surface but didn't	We paid \$8.50 for ground shipping. Scale arrived	Unused items can be returned anytime	Item is listed under a section called "Gadgets No Kitchen Can Live Without!"	Polder says that out the 12 scales the company makes, this

	take up much counter space. Weighs food up to 11 pounds, in 1/8-oz. increments.	in one business day.	for a refund. Customer pays return shipping.	Web site is clearly laid out.	model is among the top five sellers. Requires one nine-volt battery.
Cooking.com Escali Cibo \$59.95 800-663-8810	The easiest of the nutritional scales to use. Still, it had small buttons. Weighs food up to 6.6 pounds.	Ground shipping is \$9.99. Scale arrived within two business days.	Unused products can be returned anytime. Customer pays return shipping.	Product description on the site could be more detailed. Phone reps were helpful and knowledgeable.	An Escali spokesman says the company is working to find a new, small design with easy-to-press buttons. Comes with one nine volt battery.
Chef's Resource Salter Nutri-Weigh Dietary Scale \$99.95 866-765-2433 chefsresource.com	Pretty complicated, with a database of 1,440 foods and liquids. You can input another 100 foods. Weighs up to six pounds, 10 ounces.	Ground shipping is free on orders over \$99. Ours arrived in four business days.	Return within 30 days. Customer pays shipping and original shipping cost if delivery was free.	This is one of the 18 food scales on the site.	Rick Smith, owner of Chef's Resource, says this is the site's top selling scale. It's temporarily out of stock, but should be back next week. Nine-volt alkaline battery included.
Kitchen Universe Soehnle Food Control Electronic Kitchen Scale \$89.95 800-481-6679 kitchen-universe.com	Held nutritional data for more than 400 foods. Scale had	Free ground shipping on orders over \$79. Ours came in four business	Unused items must be returned in 30 days.	Kitchen Universe carries over 30 food scales. Web site gives good details on the	Retailer says this model is a popular seller in the nutritional-scales

	the lowest maximum capacity, weighing foods up to four pounds, 6.5 ounces.	days.	Customer pays for shipping and original shipping cost if delivery was free.	products.	category.
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