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Forget the Scale: The Most Useful Gadget For Dieting May Be Your Computer

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Many people use a computer to keep track of their financial health. But few people realize they can also use it to track their nutritional health.

Nutrition-tracking software offers a surprising look into the quality of your diet, helping to identify vitamin deficits or poor eating patterns you may not know you have. Computer-based diet trackers take the guesswork out of counting calories. They create useful charts and graphs that help you monitor habits and set realistic weight-loss goals. And most include recipe builders that help turn decadent recipes into healthful foods.

Although nutrition trackers have been around for a while, they have been slow to catch on, in part because they can be time-consuming and cumbersome. But new versions are easier to use, and several are now free. The popular Internet site ediets.com now offers a free diet tracker and last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture launched the free www.mypyramidtracker.gov.

The downside to online diet trackers is that just like losing weight, using them requires commitment and patience. Even the most user-friendly programs can be confusing when you begin. Unlike money-management programs like Intuit's Quicken, which can download weeks of information from your bank or credit card, nutrition trackers require you to input food data every day. It takes several days before the charts and graphs are meaningful, so the real payoff of using a nutrition planner often doesn't come until after a week or more of use.

As a result, many users get discouraged. "It's been my experience with the computer software that it may be fun for a while," says New York University nutritionist [Lisa R. Young](#). "But from a practical standpoint, few clients seem to want to do it over the long haul."

Sticking with it, though, can produce dramatic results. Numerous studies show people who keep daily food records are far more successful at weight loss than people who don't keep track of what they eat.

When choosing a nutrition-tracking program, you want to find one that makes it easy to track your daily intake and calories burned through exercise. Look for a program that has a large food database that is easy to navigate. The most useful trackers have lots of features to analyze eating habits, but that also makes them more complicated to use.

The USDA free site, mypyramidtracker.gov, has fewer features than a subscription site, but it's a good place to start to see if you like food tracking. You can input only foods listed in the database, so some of your tracking may not be precise. But even with that limit, a day's worth of data can show you how your habits stack up against the recommended dietary guidelines.

My favorite diet tracker is www.MyFoodDiary.com. It requires a \$9 monthly fee, but I find it the least complicated and most useful of the trackers I've tried. It takes a few moments of clicking around, but it's fairly easy to figure out. The site helps you determine your ideal weight, daily calorie needs and how long it will take you to lose weight. The food database is practical and easy to search. For instance, instead of just listing coffee, as do most trackers, MyFoodDiary includes listings from Starbucks -- a difference that can add up to 400 or more daily calories.

One of the best features is the recipe builder, which allows you to compute the calories in a favorite recipe and make it more healthful. I quickly took a cheesy squash casserole that was more than 400 calories and 17 grams of saturated fat a serving and knocked it down to 260 calories and seven grams of fat just by making low- and nonfat ingredient substitutes.

You can get more features with downloadable nutrition trackers, but they also tend to be the most cumbersome. The Web site TopTenReviews.com ranked Kathleen's Diet Planner as its best-rated nutrition software package. The diet planner was designed by Paul Lagasse, president of Better Byte Software Co. (www.betterbyte.red-deer.com) in Alberta, Canada, after his wife Kathleen needed to start tracking her food for health reasons. Mr. Lagasse says he lost 60 pounds using the tracking program and he has continued to refine and update it to make it easier to use. At about \$65, it's among the most expensive, but it includes one of the largest — food databases available, with more than 31,000 foods listed. It also comes with free trial period, and emails asking for help are answered quickly. □

Someone who is willing to stick with it will get a lot out of this tracker, but I found all the options intimidating. The reviewers at TopTen agreed the screen can seem daunting at first, but they ultimately found it simple to navigate.

A relatively easy to use tracker is DietPower, which has won praise from reviewers at the American Dietetic Association. The \$50 program also comes with a free trial, but its food database isn't as extensive as those from other programs. You start by telling it your height, weight and goals and it will respond with a calorie budget and information on whether your goal is realistic. Unlike other programs DietPower will automatically adjust its recommendations depending on your rate of weight of loss. So if you aren't losing weight at the expected rate on a 1,700 calorie diet, for instance, DietPower will lower your daily calorie budget.

All of the trackers have their limits and may at times be tricky to use. But all diet trackers get better with time. The more daily eating and exercise information you input, the more useful and simple the planners become. And even if you stop using it, the information you glean from even a short time of use will help you make lasting improvements to your eating habits.

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