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# Health apps keep us on track

## Mobile devices make it easier to count calories and lose weight in fun ways

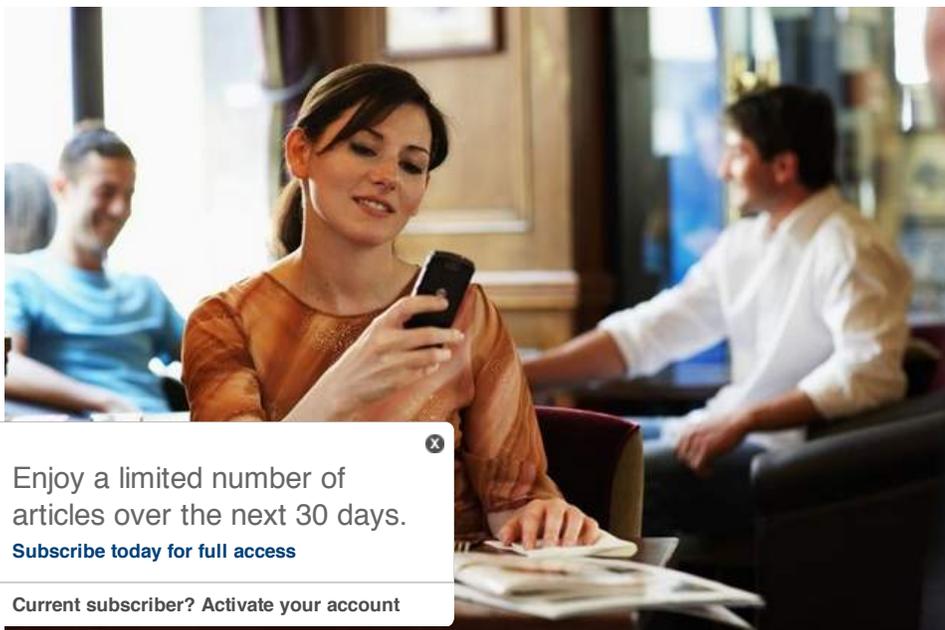
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Weight-loss apps can help users keep track of the food they eat and the calories they burn while exercising. / Thinkstock

Written by **Anna Jeffries** [CentralOhio.com](#)

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It's by your side when you go to the grocery store, tucked into your bag when you head to the gym and next to your bed when you fall asleep.

So, for many, using a cellphone application to count calories, work out smarter or live healthier seems completely natural.

"I think it's a natural complement to what the phone is now," said Dan Rockwell, program manager of the Software Prototyping Center at Technology Commercialization and Knowledge Transfer at The Ohio State University. "We carry it around with us every day. It just seems like a natural extension to put information that impacts your life into that device."

**LOOKING TO TRY A HEALTHY APP?**

Health apps for mobile devices are growing in popularity, Rockwell said.

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» U.S. Surgeon General's Healthy Apps Challenge, [sghealthyapps.challenge.gov](http://sghealthyapps.challenge.gov)  
The U.S. Surgeon General recently launched a contest challenging people to create healthy apps that are both user friendly, and effective.

There are more than 56 winners that deal with healthy eating, exercising and stress management. There are even some kid-friendly apps, such as Max's Plate!, which uses a game to teach kids about healthy eating.

» Lose It, [loseit.com](http://loseit.com)

Like many weight-loss apps, this one helps users keep track of the food they eat and the calories they burn while exercising.

» Fooducate, [fooducate.com](http://fooducate.com)

This app can be used while users shop at the grocery store. It scans the bar codes of products and shares nutritional information with the consumer. It also suggests similar, healthy alternatives.

» Couch to 5K, [active.com/mobile](http://active.com/mobile)

This app, and others like it, takes users through the steps they need to go from a couch potato to running a 5K race.

*Source: Dan Rockwell, program manager of the Software Prototyping Center at Technology Commercialization & Knowledge Transfer at The Ohio State University and Brian Hartz, associate professor and head athletic trainer at Denison University.*

#### HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT APP

Dan Rockwell provides some suggestions for finding the best app for you:

- » Search for apps using big keywords such as "weight loss" or "gluten-free."
- » Read reviews before you download. If it's a free app and you don't like it, there's no harm in deleting it.
- » Don't be afraid to experiment with different apps. There is no one app that works for everyone.

More than 24,000 health-related apps are in the iPhone store, alone and more are being developed constantly, he said.

"One of biggest sectors of growth are these wellness-related apps," he said. "There is tons of creativity."

Some apps work as calorie counters, allowing users to keep a record of what they've eaten. Others focus on a specific type of exercise, such as jogging, biking or yoga.

There are also apps that focus on tracking sleep patterns or improving stress management.

Whether they can be downloaded for free or bought for several dollars, these apps can give users an interactive aid to meet their fitness goals, said Brian Hartz, an associate professor and head athletic trainer at Denison University.

"It's a tool to help you monitor what you are doing and how you can do it better," he said.

#### Changing habits

Human beings are creatures of habit and making lifestyle changes can be difficult, Hartz said.

"Human behaviors are hard to change," he said. "Most people eat the same things every day. They are very habitual."

Apps can help highlight the healthy -- and not so healthy -- choices that a person is making.

"This is a way for you to track. People can become more conscious of what they eat or

how much they exercise," he said.

Some apps send out alerts or text messages reminding users they need to make a healthy choice, said Bernadette Melnyk, associate vice president for health promotion at OSU. She also serves as OSU's chief wellness officer and dean of its College of Nursing.

"Visual triggers or prompts like you can get with smart phones are reminders," she said. "There is more evidence growing that those things can help people with behavior change."

Apps also can help users stay organized when they are trying to reach a goal, Hartz said.

They often store information and show changes over time.

"Also if you have to interact with the phone, it makes you much more

conscious of what you are putting in your mouth," he said.

### **More to come**

In 2011, the U.S. Surgeon General organized a contest, challenging people to design and submit healthy apps, Hartz said.

Dozens of apps were submitted and the winners are displayed on the U.S. Surgeon General's website.

As time goes by and technology increases, more apps will be developed, Rockwell said.

In the future, consumers might see applications that use sensors or other devices to monitor heart rates or blood glucose levels.

Another trend in health apps is gamification -- using games to educate or motivate users, he said.

One example is the "Run, Zombies!" jogging game that gives users a running workout to do, while taking them through a scenario where they are running away from zombies.

"You don't really think about the fact that you just ran five miles -- you've been trying to get away."

### **Just a tool**

Healthy apps can be helpful resources for those trying to make a change. But both Hartz and Melnyk stressed that apps are just a tool.

A cellphone can't make you stop eating the doughnut or drive you to the gym. It's up to the consumer to use the app correctly, Hartz said.

"They are a tool that can aid those who are driven to (make changes) anyway," he said. "They have to be compelled to want to interact and use it."

One positive thing about healthy apps is it provides another option, Melnyk said.

"Not everyone will relate to one set strategy," she said. "The more we can make different types of resources available, people can chose what matches their style."

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