

BITS & BYTES

A GUIDE TO DIGITALLY TRACKING
YOUR FOOD, FITNESS, AND HEALTH



Meagan F. Moyer, MPH, RDN, LD and
the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

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Bits and Bytes: A Guide to Digitally Tracking Your Food, Fitness, and Health

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INTRODUCTION

SAMPLE
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WHAT IS TRACKING FOR HEALTH?

Your sister logs the food she eats on a website. Your neighbor counts his steps using a fitness application, or “app,” on his smartphone. Your aunt writes down her blood sugar levels to show her doctor. What do these people have in common? They all track for their health! Keeping track of key health habits, like what foods you eat, how often you exercise, how much water you drink, and how well you sleep, can make a big difference in improving your health.

Many people keep track of health habits. In 2012, the Pew Research Center asked 3,000 adults about their health-tracking habits. They found that 7 out of 10 people tracked health measures “for themselves or for a loved one.” They also found the following:

- 60% tracked their weight, diet, or exercise routine; and
- 33% tracked important health numbers like blood pressure, blood sugar, and how many hours slept.

People track their health habits in many ways. The Pew Research Center study found the following:

- 49% kept track of progress “in their heads,”
- 34% recorded their progress in a notebook or journal, and

- 21% used technology like a website or an app on their phone.

(Note: While any kind of tracking can be helpful, keeping track of your eating and exercise habits only in your head might not be enough when trying to make a change or meet a goal.)

The survey also found that many people share the information they track with their doctor or other health experts, with their spouse or partner, with family members, and with friends. Sharing tracking data with other people helps with motivation and support. We will discuss this more in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6.



WHAT ARE DIGITAL HEALTH TOOLS?

Technology moves very fast. The way we use technology today is very different from the way we used it even just 5 years ago. Now more than ever, computers and cell phones are changing the way we communicate, learn, work, and play. Technology is changing the way we think about our health, too. Digital health-tracking tools are becoming more popular and include devices that are worn or carried (including cell phones). These devices are used to measure a person's health habits.

If you have a smartphone, tablet, or computer, you can use digital health tools. They are easy to use and can be inexpensive—in fact, many websites and apps are free. Wearable devices are more expensive than apps and websites, but they can tell you a lot more information. A list of popular websites, apps, and devices is included in Chapter 5.



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF DIGITAL HEALTH TOOLS?

Why would you use digital tools to measure your health? You can use them to do the following:

- develop healthy habits, such as eating right or being physically active;
- manage your weight;
- help prevent or improve health conditions, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol; and
- share information with your health care providers and get feedback on your health.

Many medical doctors, exercise specialists, and registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) use digital health tools with their clients. Health care providers are asking patients to track health details such as the symptoms they experience, the food they eat, and how often they exercise. Patients can receive better care from their health care providers when they share their health-tracking information. By sharing and tracking, patients take control of their own health.

You'll learn more about the benefits of using digital tools in Chapter 1.



HOW CAN THIS BOOK HELP ME?

This book will explain how digital health tracking can help you achieve your health and fitness goals. It will cover how to:

- get started with digital tracking,
- decide which health habits to track and why, and
- choose from among the many digital tracking tools available.



DID YOU KNOW?

Leonardo Da Vinci is credited with conceptualizing the first pedometer!

Benjamin Franklin kept detailed journals on his mental health and personal growth.

You will read about RDNs who use digital tracking with their clients. You will also read success stories from people who track their own health habits. We welcome you to join the growing number of people who track for better health!

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COMMON TERMS

Here are some common terms related to weight management and digital health tracking.

APPLICATION OR APP: a software program that performs a specific task (such as a game, a media player, or a map). Users download apps onto a desktop computer or onto a mobile device, such as a smartphone or tablet.

BODY MASS INDEX (BMI): the ratio of a person's weight to height. BMI is used to determine a person's risk for health conditions. In general, higher BMI numbers equal more risk for developing a weight-related health condition.

CALORIE: a unit of energy that comes from eating food and drinking beverages. Carbohydrates, protein, and fat in foods provide our bodies with calories.

DIGITAL HEALTH TRACKING: using technology, through websites, applications (apps), or other devices, to record habits with the goal of improving your health.

DOWNLOAD: putting an application or program onto your computer, smartphone, or tablet. Most applications and programs come from the Internet.

HEALTH DATA: pieces of information that can be used to analyze a health behavior or condition. Medical professionals use health data to make treatment recommendations. You can use health data from digital tracking to improve your health too.

SEARCH BOX: a rectangular box on a website or app in which you type in a word or phrase you want to look up.

SELF-MONITORING: keeping track of your own habits to keep or change those actions for the better.

SMARTPHONE: A cellular phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, typically having a touchscreen, Internet access, and an operating system that is able to run apps.

WEARABLE DEVICE OR WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY: a wireless device that is worn or carried by a person to track and record personal health data.

CHAPTER 1

IS DIGITAL TRACKING RIGHT FOR ME?

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TRACKING CAN HELP anyone who wants to improve his or her health! It works because it helps people become more aware of their eating, exercise, and health-related habits. Some of the health concerns of trackers may include:

- overweight or obesity,
- reaching or maintaining a healthy weight,
- diabetes, or
- high blood pressure.

Of these, tracking to help lose weight is the most popular. Studies have shown that tracking helps people lose weight and keep it off. To meet their weight goals, many people who track regularly log the food they eat, how much exercise they do, and how much they weigh. There are three main ways to track these habits:

- paper records (pen and paper)
- tracking websites
- mobile devices (mobile phones and wearable physical activity devices)

This guide will focus on the last two ways to track: using websites and mobile devices. While losing weight may be the most popular reason to use digital tracking, once you decide to track, you can use it to help meet any of your health goals!



WHY SHOULD I GO DIGITAL?

Tracking is clearly helpful to those looking to manage their weight and improve their health. But does that mean you need to go digital? In the past, many people successfully met their health goals using pen and paper to track their food. This may have involved looking up foods in a calorie-counter book. Today, technology offers many features that can make tracking easier. It can create a more complete picture of your personal health data.

BENEFITS OF DIGITAL TRACKING

Why are more people turning to digital tracking? It offers many benefits that can help them reach their goals. Digital tracking is:

FAST. Once you get the hang of the technology, using digital trackers is quicker than using pen and paper. For example, many food trackers store your commonly eaten foods in a favorites list so you don't need to look them up every time. You can also copy entire meals from one day to the next with one or two clicks.

EASY. Digital trackers do the math for you. They automatically add up the calories you eat at each meal throughout the day. They can total the number of calories you burn during activity, too. At a glance, you can see where you stand in the balance of calories in and calories out.

CUSTOMIZED. Most fitness trackers use your specific information, such as your age, weight, level of activity, and other factors, to determine a realistic amount of calories you burn during activity and how many calories you should eat to reach your goals.

COMPREHENSIVE. With pen and paper, you may find it possible to track the basics, such as number of calories eaten, hours of sleep, minutes per type of activity, and so on. Digital tracking can do so much more. It calculates nutrients, which can help with weight management. Some tracking devices can tell you how often you wake during the night. They can measure your pace, mileage, and heart rate during physical activity.

These are just a few examples. Chapter 2 goes into more detail about the many features of tracking devices.

VISUAL. Digital trackers turn the data you enter into graphs and charts that help you better understand how to manage your weight. For example, food trackers can break down your daily intake into a pie chart to show you what percentage of your calories came from carbohydrates, fat, and protein. You can track your weight loss over time with a line graph—and watching that line go down is an encouraging sight!

FUN! Games, competitions, and rewards are built into many digital tracking tools. They can motivate you to stick to your goals, make your workouts more fun, and provide a community of like-minded supporters.

SHAREABLE. It's easy to share your tracking information and progress with your doctor and registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN). When they have this tracking information, they can easily make changes to their recommendations for you. Many RDNs encourage their clients to send them photos or records of what they eat, along with their food and exercise journals. Digital trackers make sharing this information easy!



TRACKING TO MANAGE YOUR WEIGHT

To lose, gain, or maintain your weight, it's all about correctly balancing the amount of calories you eat with the amount your body uses through daily living and physical activity. When you eat just as many calories as your body uses, your weight stays the same. When you eat more calories than your body uses, you gain weight. On the other hand, when you eat fewer calories than your body uses,

? DID YOU KNOW?

One out of every five smartphone owners uses a health app to track or manage their health.

you lose weight. Digitally tracking food and activity helps you balance calories in and calories out so that you can achieve your weight goals.

BUILDING HEALTHY HABITS FOR LOSING WEIGHT

Getting to a healthy weight—and keeping the weight off—means forming healthy habits and sticking with them. Most successful weight-loss programs focus on these lifestyle habits:

- Eat and drink fewer calories (“calories in”).
- Be more physically active (“calories out”).
- Self-monitor, or be aware of, eating and physical activity behavior.



WHAT IS A CALORIE?

Calories are the energy supplied by food. Carbohydrates, fats, and protein provide calories. Everyone has different calorie needs. The amount of calories you need depends on your age, sex, physical activity level, height, and weight.

Changing habits can be hard, but using tracking to self-monitor behaviors can help. By tracking your food and physical activity, you will begin to see patterns in your choices. When you see these patterns, they can be easier to change. For example, perhaps you begin to see that you consume a large portion of your daily calories in front of the television most nights or eat bigger portions when dining out with certain friends. Tracking can help you recognize these habits and identify where you can make positive changes.

TRACKING TO MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Perhaps you have already lost weight, or you just want to stay at your current weight; digital tracking is beneficial for maintainers, too! The National Weight Control Registry studies the eating, exercise, and lifestyle habits of people who have lost weight and kept it off for 1 year or longer. The registry's goal is to find the common strategies of people who maintain their weight loss. The strategies are shared with others to help them achieve the same success. Turns out digital tracking can make most of these weight-loss maintaining habits easier! Here are the seven lifestyle habits of people who maintain their weight loss, and how to use digital tracking to achieve them:

SUCCESSFUL HABIT	WHAT TO DO	HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP
Eat breakfast	Eat breakfast every day. Try on-the-go breakfasts if you are busy, such as a peanut butter and banana sandwich, yogurt and granola in a cup, or a whole-grain cereal bar with a piece of fruit.	Some food log apps alert you to enter your food if you haven't by a certain time of the day, which could remind you to eat breakfast if you missed it. Check the app's settings.
Engage in regular physical activity	Do at least 30 minutes, 5 times a week (150 minutes total), of moderate-intensity physical activity. Start slow and work up to 20 minutes a day if you aren't used to exercising. Check with your doctor before you begin.	Use fitness apps and wearable devices to log your time spent exercising and see how many calories you burn.

SUCCESSFUL HABIT	WHAT TO DO	HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP
Decrease sitting screen time	Limit time sitting in front of the TV and non-work related “screen time” to less than one and a half hours a day (or 10 hours a week).	For extra entertainment, challenge yourself or others on your fitness tracking app. See if you can beat the number of steps you took the day before.
Self-track	Weigh yourself regularly. Track your food intake every day. Log how many minutes you exercise.	Use any self-tracking app, website, or device that you find fun, easy, and interesting!
Follow a healthy eating plan	Aim for 20% to 35% of calories from fat. Look for lower-calorie foods. Choose foods with little added sugar.	Food logs track calories, fat, and sugar for you.
Maintain control over eating habits	Be in charge of your eating habits. Don’t eat “just because it’s there” or out of emotion.	Some apps let you type in text along with your food entry. If you are bored, hungry, tired, angry, or happy while eating, take note. You may find there are certain times of the day you are more likely to stress-eat.
Resist overeating less healthy foods	Log your food <i>before</i> you eat. This makes you think twice before splurging on foods. Use logs to learn portion sizes of high-calorie foods.	Use the “Favorite Foods” list on food trackers to make logging even easier and faster.

Overall, weight-loss maintainers commit to long-term behavior changes—not quick fixes. Food logs and fitness devices can make these important lifestyle changes easy, exciting, and even fun!



HOW DO I GET STARTED?

You want to start using digital tracking tools. So how do you get started?

You can access digital tools in two ways: through a website or by downloading the app. If you mostly use your computer, you will likely use a website. If you have a smartphone, using an app might be the way to go.

Many people use both. Many tracking tools have both a website version and an app version. For example, you can log your breakfast on the Lose It! app and your lunch from a computer by visiting www.loseit.com.

SIGNING UP ONLINE

To start tracking on a website, you will need to sign up for an account. We are going to use the Lose It! website (www.loseit.com) as an example, but you can use the tracking website you like best. (See Chapter 5 to compare options.)



NOTE:

Steps may be different on the website you choose, but the overall process will be similar.

STEP 1

From the website's homepage, look for the button to sign up. For example, on the Lose It! website, you'll see a button that says "Start Losing It!" You may see "Register," "Get started," or "Create an account" on other websites.

STEP 2

Enter your information. You will need to provide your e-mail address and create a password. Answer the questions to create your personal profile.

STEP 3

When you finish creating your profile, the website will take you to your personal home page where you can track your food, activity, and other health goals.

STEP 4

Remember your log-in information so you can sign in every day.

DOWNLOADING AN APP ON YOUR APPLE IPHONE OR IPAD

STEP 1

Tap “App Store” from your home screen.

STEP 2

If you know what app you want, tap the search magnifying glass at the bottom of the screen. Type the name of the app at the top of the screen. To browse apps, tap “Top Charts” at the bottom of the screen. Then tap “Categories” in the top left corner. Scroll down to “Health & Fitness.”

STEP 3

When you’ve found the app you want, tap on the name.

STEP 4

Tap “Get” and then “Install” to download.

STEP 5

Press the home button to go back to the home screen. Find your app by swiping your finger left or right until you see the app icon. Tap the icon to open.

DOWNLOADING AN APP ON YOUR ANDROID SMARTPHONE OR TABLET

STEP 1

From your home screen, tap the Google Play icon.



NOTE:

Steps may be different on your device, but the overall process will be similar.

STEP 2

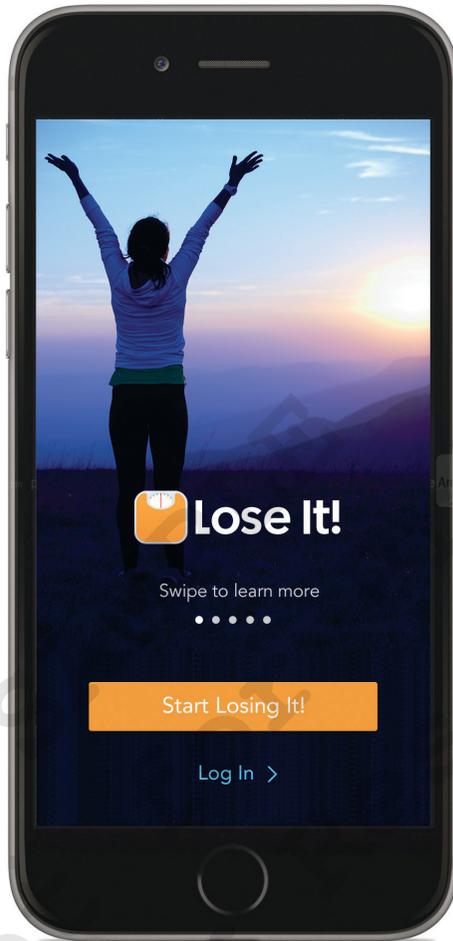
If you know what app you want, tap the search magnifying glass and type the name of the app. If you want to browse for apps, tap “Categories” at the top of the screen. Digital health-tracking apps will be under the group called “Health & Fitness.”

STEP 3

When you’ve found the app you want, tap the install button.

STEP 4

After the app is done downloading, find it by tapping the Apps icon or by looking at your home screen.



Welcome page for Lose It!, a popular tracking app.
SOURCE: WWW.LOSEIT.COM



REAL-LIFE STORY—PAMELA I.

What do you track?

“I track my food, activity, and water intake by using an app on my smartphone. It took some time to get in the habit of logging. I soon realized my habits, which made it easier over time. I can copy entire meals to another day if I eat the same foods.”

Why do you track?

“Tracking lets me know when I’m not eating enough protein or eating too much fat or carbohydrates. I like to track my activities and see how many calories I’m burning. I also want to make sure I’m drinking enough water. If I drink water like I’m supposed to, I feel a lot better.”

How often do you track?

“I track my food, water, and activities every day. The more I track, the more I learn about what I’m putting into my body. I can make better choices about what I plan to do or eat.”

How does tracking help you?

“If I eat healthy and drink water like I should, my body performs well. Tracking has taught me about portion size, too. Calories add up even if you are eating 3 cups of broccoli!”

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SOURCES

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Digitally tracking your food and fitness habits can help you balance the calories you take in with the calories you burn so you can achieve your weight goals, and it can help you to see patterns in your food and fitness habits, which can make them easier to change. It's clear why the number of digital health tools have increased rapidly in recent years – and why more health professionals are recommending their use.

This accessible guide covers how to:

- get started with digital tracking;
- decide which health habits to track, including food, fitness, sleep, and why; and
- choose from among the many digital tracking tools available.

This book will help you to get started digitally tracking your food and fitness habits today.



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