

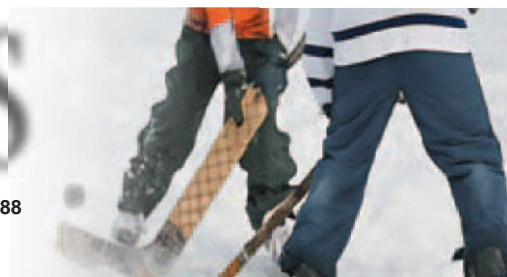


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Use your fitness Apps wisely



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The popularity of nutrition and fitness apps is at an all time high. With the rise of Fit Bit, and free diet apps such as My Fitness Pal and Lose It!, many people are turning to their smart phone or tablet to track their food intake. There are even apps to help you track your fluid intake, with options for setting reminders to drink. But can these apps be helpful for athletes?

Currently there is limited availability of apps designed specifically for sports nutrition. If an athlete is wanting to use a nutrition app they will most likely use a general diet app which are mainly designed for weight loss. These apps can be helpful for tracking food and fluid intake for athletes. The drawback is they do not provide information or guidance around timing of meals or composition of meals to support changing training, hydration or recovery needs. So the best way for an athlete to decide if a nutrition app would be a good tool for them to use is to understand the strengths and limitations of using them.

Research supports that when people track what they are eating that it can help with managing their weight. For athletes wanting to maintain, lose or gain weight, keeping track of what they are eating can help them self monitor their intake.

Research also supports that people who use a nutrition app are more likely to track their intake more consistently and for longer than those that track it manually with a paper and pen. An app can make it easy to keep track of food and drinks you eat and activity you do. Everything is in one place and always on hand. An athlete can immediately enter the foods they eat rather than relying on memory later. The most popular diet apps such as My Fitness Pal and Lose It! have huge nutrient databases making it is easier to search for a variety of foods.

A hydration app may be a good option for athletes that find it challenging to drink enough fluids throughout the day to support their activity. There are a variety of fluid tracking apps such as iHydrate, Hydration Genius, Water Alert (and many more) that offer alerts to remind athletes to drink up! Athletes can set daily fluid drinking goals, schedules to track their water intake to meet their training needs.

The challenges with some diet apps are that the nutrient data base may be inaccurate. Some apps allow users to add their own food entries which may be incorrect. The database may be also be U.S. based so there can be difficulty finding Canadian foods and restaurants. A good option for athletes looking for more Canadian options is an app available from Dietitians of Canada called eaTracker. Foods and supplements from the Canadian Nutrient File are used to populate the eaTracker database.

Another challenge with diet apps is that tracking your intake takes some time and effort. Even though nutrition apps have made it easy to log your meals quickly there still is some effort required on a daily basis by the athlete.

Athletes may not be sure what to enter for the portion size of the food the consumed. Dishes with multiple ingredients can also be difficult to enter especially if the athlete is unsure of how it was made. Athletes can become better aware of their portion sizes if they measure their foods using a measuring cup occasionally. Most people tend to eat similar foods on a regular basis so once they measure their foods once or twice (such as cereal in the morning, or a portion of pasta in the evening) it becomes easier for them to better estimate their portion sizes.

Another challenge is that many apps place the focus on calories rather than looking at whole foods, nutrients and lifestyle factors. An athlete may be able to see that they are meeting their calorie needs, but if they are making poor choices in the quality of foods their performance can suffer. My Fitness Pal and Lose it! provide information on calories and some limited feedback on nutrient profile in the free version. When you upgrade to the premium version for a cost users have access to more detail in the type of nutrients they are consuming. An app such as eaTracker offers more information about how many Canada's Food Guide servings were consumed, 13 core nutrients listed on the nutrition facts table with options to expand to potassium, B-vitamins and vitamins D and E. This app also allows users to set goals for healthy eating beyond tracking calories.

The bottom line is that a nutrition or fluid tracking app can be one of many tools an athlete can use to support their sports nutrition goals but should not be the only one. Meeting with a registered dietitian to receive individual nutrition recommendations that take into account competition dates and off season periods is key. Registered dietitians can also give athletes guidance around the timing of food intake, the appropriate use of sport foods and drinks, carbohydrate loading, rehydration and recovery nutrition. A nutrition app can help both the athlete and dietitian asses and track the dietary intake of the athlete.