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For the Fit or the Flabby, A Digital Conscience

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IN the dead of a long, cold winter, many people like to think ahead to the pleasures of summer. If you are one of those people, and you dream of losing some weight to show off that swimsuit or those bright summer clothes, now is the time to start. Naturally, there are digital tools that can help. Here are some popular ways to use the Web, a hand-held organizer or PC software to keep track of what you are eating, and how you are burning it off.

[Weight Watchers International](#), which has been in the diet business for decades, still relies on weekly meetings as its main method for promoting healthy eating through education and group support. Some 39,000 weekly meetings around the world are said to draw a total of more than a million members. But the company has also developed an online program through an exclusive licensee, [WeightWatchers.com](#) (<http://www.weightwatchers.com/>).

The site, which does not disclose its membership but says the number increased fivefold last year, has both free and fee-based features. Meal plans, recipes that assign Weight Watchers Points values to various dishes, and message boards, for example, are available at no cost to anyone who registers at the site. (The information that users post on message boards is not monitored for accuracy, however.)

A service known as E-tools is available to those who pay to attend weekly meetings, and it costs an additional \$12.95 a month. That gives you access to a journal in which you record your daily food intake, plus an exercise and weight tracker, a points calculator, a customized meal planner and a recipe builder. The recipe builder is an especially nice feature that lets you enter the ingredients for the dish you are preparing and then tells you how many Weight Watchers Points there are in one serving.

For those who cannot or do not want to attend meetings, [WeightWatchers.com](#) also provides a Web-based version of Weight Watchers membership for \$14.95 a month plus a \$29.95 sign-up fee.

Noticeably absent from the Weight Watchers site is any accommodation for hand-held computers. Several Weight Watchers members have devised personal-organizer software and posted it on the Web, only to have the Weight Watchers legal team track it down and demand that they remove it.

Linda Carilli, a spokeswoman for Weight Watchers International, said the company was considering adding tools for hand-held organizers. "But we have a commitment to a high-quality product, and we want to make sure anything we develop is in the best interest of our members," she said.

Dr. Robert C. Atkins and his low-carbohydrate diet program have a considerable Web presence through the official Atkins site, atkinscenter.com, and dozens of other sites developed by devoted followers. The official site provides instructions on how to follow the Atkins program. Registered users can track weight loss, find recipes, seek advice, read newsletters, and buy Atkins books and food products (or find stores that sell them). You can listen to Dr. Atkins, read an interview with him and delve into his nutritional theories.

As much as the site is about the Atkins program and its products, it is a platform for promoting the Atkins mission to convince the public that limiting carbohydrates is a crucial strategy in weight loss. Users of the site's online tools pay no fee except for any products they purchase.

The e-Diets program (<http://www.ediets.com/>), which claims 980,000 members, seems to want to be all things to all dieters. Register at the site, and you get a customized meal plan designed to "fit your lifestyle," regular updates to the plan, shopping lists, recipes and round-the-clock online support, including a mentor program.

All of this is supervised, the site says, by "experts who are well versed in the areas of nutrition, fitness, psychology, motivation, relationships, spirituality and eating disorders," including behavioral psychologists. The program also provides fitness experts who can design a fitness program for the home or the gym.

E-diets seems less intent on promoting a single program for weight loss and management than it is on promoting a healthy lifestyle through proper diet and exercise. This guidance will set you back \$5 a week for the first nine weeks and \$10 a month thereafter. Alternatively, you can pay \$99 for the first year and then \$15 a month.

If you are as tired of sitting at your computer as you are of dieting, you need only tote your personal organizer around with you to keep track of what you're eating and how many calories you are burning at the gym. Dozens of diet and exercise tracker programs are available at sites like handango.com, palmgear.com and eurocool.com. A drawback of most, however, is that they work only with the hand-held and lack a desktop component.

One popular program that does have both desktop and hand-held modules is the Diet and Exercise Assistant from Keyoe (<http://www.keyoe.com/>). Available for the [Palm](#), Pocket PC and Windows operating systems, the Diet and Exercise Assistant is not tied to any particular philosophy. The hand-held and desktop versions are easy to use and allow you to monitor your total calorie consumption and the intake of carbohydrates, fat, fiber, protein and so on. The program includes a 5,000-item food database

with nutritional information, and it can be customized by deleting foods you don't eat and adding others that are not included. A nutrition information label is all you need to add a food to the database.

The exercise tracker is equally versatile and draws on a big database of common weight and cardiovascular routines. A journal and logbook allow you to make notes and keep track of goals and progress, and it is easy to synchronize both user data and the databases.

The hand-held and desktop versions of Diet and Exercise Assistant are sold separately for \$19.95 each, but both are available in trial versions. You cannot store any of your data with the trial versions, but you can see enough to make a buying decision.

Similar in scope but lacking a desktop application, the CalorieKing Hand-Held Diet Diary (<http://www.calorieking.com/>) is available for the Palm and Pocket PC operating systems. The full program costs \$29.95; a scaled-down version that simply includes a food database is \$14.95. Both are also available in trial versions at Handango.

Runner's Log, Cyclist's Log and Swimmer's Log are easy-to-use programs for Palm OS that allow you to track your miles, laps and running and cycling routes, charting your progress from beginner to marathon athlete. These shareware programs, from the software developer Martin Rice, have PC versions and are available for downloading for \$10 each at PalmGear.com, Handango and <http://www.fitnesslogs.com/>. (A Runner's Log for the Pocket PC is expected soon.)

The Handango Fitness Suite, for Palm OS only, combines features from four popular programs - the Diet and Exercise Assistant from Keyoe, Martin Rice's Runner's Log, and Craig Cecil's PocketCardio and LiftLog - in one download for \$29.95. Each component functions separately, and some users claim that the suite can be confusing to use. There is no trial version, so research each program before you buy.