Fitness and Nutrition Apps – Making the Best Choice for You

The world of "apps" (programs that work on mobile and tablet devices) continues to grow. With so many apps available, how do you choose the right ones for you? Games and entertainment apps are one thing, but when it comes to your health and lifestyle habits, proceed with caution. There is a lot more to consider, including safety. Think carefully and apply the criteria below before you "Buy Now."

❏ Ease of Use
If it's not easy to use, you probably won't use it. The best apps are intuitive, simple, and clearly explain how to use them. Check out reviews, app ratings from other users and sample screen shots of the app. Some companies offer a free version, demo or trial before purchasing.

❏ Main Features
What's the main purpose or function of the app? Think about what you need and want from your app and make a list. Below are some examples of features that you may wish to look for in nutrition and fitness apps:

- Goal setting capabilities
- Food log (via photos or manual entry) to record and track meals/snacks and see nutrient intake
- Exercise tracking (either from connection to a wearable device or self-entry)
- GPS capability that can track mileage, pace, etc. for outdoor activities
- Tracking – a place to record and track weight and/or body measurements to see changes over time
- Comprehensive food and exercise database
- Ability to add, edit, delete, or customize the food or exercise database
- Graphs and analysis features
- Ability to track many types of nutrients (e.g. carbohydrates, proteins, fats, water, vitamins and minerals)
- Calendar feature to view history, see progress, plan meal(s) for next day or next week

❏ Content
Depending on the topic and information provided in an app, look for references and/or sourcing from reputable national or government organizations. What cautions or caveats are included?

Watch for red flags. For example, does the app recommend eating fewer than 1,200 calories a day to lose weight, which could be risky and unsustainable? Does the app suggest jumping into a vigorous workout routine even though you're a beginner, which could increase the risk of an injury? If the app contains red flags, it may be best to steer clear.

Be especially cautious – some of the most common apps out there don't meet national health guidelines. A 2015 review published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* compared 30 popular fitness apps to physical activity guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM). Very few of the apps that were reviewed were evidence-based and followed the ACSM guidelines. This may put users at risk for injury, especially beginners.

❒ What Do Others Say?

Current and previous user reviews can tell you a lot about an app. Does it have the features most people want? Does it work as promised? Check the number of reviews. It's ideal when there are many reviews so you can get a sense for the main advantages and/or complaints.

❒ Price

Take your time evaluating all options. There are many good free and low cost apps available. Keep in mind that free apps may ask repeatedly if you want to upgrade, for a fee, to a version with more options/capabilities or to eliminate ads from sponsors.

❒ Other Factors

If you think you found the right app for you, consider these factors:

- **Stability/Performance -** Does the app work smoothly or do reviewers comment about bugs or crashes? Favorable reviews, positive feedback from other users and solid demo programs are good signs of a product's stability.
- **Support –** What type of support is available for the app?
- **Upgradeability –** Will the app grow with you? Are upgrades free or do they cost more? Keep in mind, many apps are updated from time to time, but it's usually up to the user to make sure those updates are made on their device when they become available.
- **Security/Privacy** – Apps that require you to enter personal information should provide evidence that your information is secure. A web-based application should provide password protection and reasonable security documentation at a minimum. Look for apps that have a privacy policy and read it carefully before entering your personal information and using it.

The world of apps can bring an ever-growing list of fun, informative, and motivating tools into your life. Making good app choices means selecting those that you'll actually use and that will bring you value in a safe and healthy way. Happy searching!

Sources:

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, *Food and Nutrition Magazine*; App Reviews. https://foodandnutrition.org/tag/apps/.

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