



### **Online Diet Analysis: Everything It Seems?**

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One of the time-tested ways for people to improve their eating habits is to keep track of what they eat in a journal or food log. Today, we can use a variety of websites to automatically tally the nutritional value of the foods we choose and even chart our progress over time. They are helpful tools, but they should be chosen, and used, with care. The results they give you depend upon several factors, and aren't any more reliable simply because a computer spit them out.

It's easy to find these sites by entering the words "diet analysis" or "nutrition analysis" into search engines such as Yahoo!, Google or Lycos. Once there, you can type in the name of a specific food or favorite recipe to check its nutritional content, or even a whole day's worth of food and drink.

All of these sites will churn out numbers for you, but not all of them get their nutritional data from the same sources. Some sites have access to a large database – 20,000 foods or more – and some only retain data for a few hundred foods. The more closely you are able to match what you've actually eaten with what's listed, the more accurate the resulting analysis will be.

On the other hand, the more you're forced to choose something "sort of like" what you really ate, the less representative the results truly are. That's why it's best to test-drive several different sites. Plug in the foods you eat on a typical day, or even a few of your most frequently chosen foods, to see how easily the site can match your choices.

Some sites also allow you to expand your personal database by entering information from a food's nutrition label.

The quality of the database is not the only factor influencing the accuracy of the resulting analysis, however. The computer-related expression “garbage in-garbage out” is quite relevant here: to get useful and accurate results, you must carefully examine the entire list of foods and select the best possible match. Accuracy in your identification of portion sizes is also a key issue.

The quality of the feedback provided by various diet analysis sites varies. Some compare your intake to the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for your specific age and sex. If so, make sure those RDA values are up-to-date. Other sites compare intake to the Daily Values used on food labels, but this is less accurate, because that single standard for average adults may not apply to you. Check, too, whether you can individualize your nutritional goals. Those with high blood cholesterol might have been instructed to aim for no more than 7 percent of their calories from saturated fat, instead of the 10 percent advocated for most of us.

One of the problems with the feedback from these automated diet analysis sites is that it can only compare your intake to a quantifiable goal, like RDAs or a specific number of daily calories. Yet experts like the American Institute for Cancer Research point out that while you may meet RDAs through fortified drinks and cereals, if you don't get enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans, you are still missing powerful natural phytochemicals that may help prevent cancer and other diseases.

Finally, nutrition analysis is not the same as nutrition counseling. See a registered dietitian if you want help setting nutritional goals appropriate to your individual health

needs, or for coaching on how to go from the “here” identified by online diet analysis to the “there” of your personal health goals.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*<sup>™</sup> can help. Contact your base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.