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Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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## A New App for Counting Calories

By [ANAHAD O'CONNOR](#)

Andrew Scrivani for The New York Times What's on your plate?

The toughest part of counting calories can be figuring out how many are actually on your plate. But what if your Android or iPhone could do it for you?

A smartphone app called PlateMate, developed by former Harvard engineering students and currently in the works, may soon allow you to snap a picture of your food and quickly get a good estimate of its calorie count. Other tools count calories by letting users input the foods they eat, or sending photos out to a nutritionist. A social networking app called [Meal Snap](#) allows users to get nutritional breakdowns by taking pictures of their food, though the calorie estimates often fall within a broad range. PlateMate uses a different system of social networking to quickly crunch data and estimate calories, as an article in today's Boston Globe explains:

In a paper presented last month at a software technology conference, the former students — now employed at Microsoft and Google — showcased their method of using crowd-sourcing to instantly estimate portions and identify foods on a plate, information that can then be fed into a software program to estimate the number of calories. ...

PlateMate uses a more complex crowd-sourcing tool, involving sets of individuals — getting small payments to analyze photos on a website — who analyze parts of the food photo, with some identifying the food and others estimating portion sizes. The trick is to have five individuals estimating portion sizes on each plate and then averaging those guesses.

But as one nutritionist pointed out, how can any app decipher what's hiding inside a quiche or figure out whether the cheese smothering a slice of pizza is regular or low-fat? Still, for the health- and calorie-conscious, apps like this one might one day be a helpful and snazzy new tool on the go.

Smartphone tools and social media have already secured a growing role in health and physical fitness for many Americans. Tens of millions of people looking to lose weight, eat better or stay in shape have downloaded personal training apps like [Nike Training Club](#), exercise trackers like [RunKeeper](#) and calorie-counting apps like [Lose It!](#) and

[MyFitnessPal](#). Last year, Brian Stelter, a media reporter for The New York Times, wrote about [losing 75 pounds with the help of Twitter](#).

What other health and fitness apps would you like to see someday? To learn more about PlateMate, read the full article, [“New Harvard App Counts Calories on a Plate,”](#) and then please join the discussion below.