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Lose weight, the sensitive way

If you are determined to shed those extra pounds, try wearing a calorie-counting armband.

By Maria Fitzpatrick

Published: 7:00AM BST 05 Oct 2009



Maria Fitzpatrick found the calorie-counting armband motivating Photo: MARTIN POPE

How did it come to this? In desperation to lose some weight, I have agreed to a course of electronic shock therapy. A sensory armband strapped to my left tricep is measuring how many calories I'm using at this very moment. The answer – a mere 1.8 per minute sitting at my desk – really hurts. At this rate, it will take eight hours to burn off the reduced-fat muffin that I ate for breakfast.

I submitted to being "tagged" with a KiFit armband with a heavy heart. It's a concept I find as depressing as knowing how many calories there are in a small, medium and large apple. However, the "eat less and hope for the best" principle I've been operating under thus far has not been working. I've learnt the hard way over the past fortnight that loose rules make for tight skirts.

KiFit, is a "lifestyle management system". Rather like a pedometer, it uses an armband and a display meter worn clipped to a belt or on a wristband. The way it works is to track the calories you use daily against targets determined for you according to your personal goals, whether that be weight loss per week, waist size or increased fitness. It also has a facility to record the calories used in the course of any specific activity, from walking the dog to washing the dishes. For a monthly subscription, you can then upload this data, via the armband, onto an online "activity manager" account, which analyses the data and your progress over time, even making recommendations about sleep efficiency and fitness levels. You can log your meals, too.

It's a simple concept, but clever science. A range of sensors in the armband measure motion, flux in body temperature, skin temperature, and galvanic skin response (your skin becomes more electrically conductive when you sweat), and then, using algorithms, analyses what kind of exercise you are getting and how strenuous it is.

While pedometers and calorie counters on treadmills measure the energy used only while you are walking or running – which apparently accounts for just 30 per cent of our waking hours – this new device provides an accurate picture of total calorie usage. So you know exactly where it's going (or, in the case of my thighs, not going).

After logging my personal details – everything from my height to the time I usually go to bed – I received my "targets". To burn one kilo a week and get back to my perfect weight by December, I would have to burn 2,600 calories a day, by taking 5,000 steps and at least half an hour's moderate exercise.

I never imagined I'd fail so spectacularly. A predominantly desk-bound day at work logged a measly 1,489 calories; a Saturday spent walking at a brisker-than-normal pace (and in 31C heat) around Budapest, a disappointing 2,120 calories. How deluded I've been up to now, moaning that nothing much had happened despite my giving up alcohol, bread and chocolate. The reality puts me in a foul mood. But then one evening, an alarm sounds, and the pager device congratulates me for reaching my target. It feels so good I upload my data, admire my "progress report" and go out jogging again the next morning.

Being able to put an exact number on my calorie usage has been extremely motivating, and seems to lessen the temptation not to exercise. It has been easier to avoid snacking and refuse that extra drink to bring the equation back into balance. Whatever I do consume, I know exactly what level of activity is required to reach my calorie target later in the day – so, oddly, it feels like there's less of a mountain to climb. It has made me more acutely conscious of my choices, and I feel more responsible for them (no blaming a dodgy fad diet, because the numbers don't lie). Which, I imagine, will improve my habits in the long term.

The British Nutrition Foundation agrees that it can be a big help with realistic target setting and motivation.

"Tools like this can be useful in showing the relationship between energy from food and energy you burn though being active," says nutritionist Sara Stanner, who is the science programme manager for the British Nutrition Foundation. "Accurately showing how much energy is being lost through activity is extremely useful, as this is often overestimated by people on diets. Including an assessment of sleep, a lack of which has been associated with obesity, is also helpful.

"It is difficult to get an accurate picture of calorie consumption/expenditure by using food and physical activity diaries, as both are difficult and burdensome, and tools such as these can make it much easier to get a handle on how to change your lifestyle accordingly," she adds.

This KiFit won't appeal to everyone. If you're already athletic, or very disciplined, you might find this a superfluous bit of gadgetry with unnecessary homework. But if, like me, you have a tendency to stray, then the friendly parole officer approach may just keep you on the straight and narrow.

• KiFit costs £149.99, plus £9.98 per month online activity manager subscription.

Stockist: 020 7307 8280, www.kifit.co.uk

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