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Tracking intake: diet do or don't?

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Welcome to the most popular time of the year for anything diet and weight loss related. I get asked a lot if people should track what they eat/drink. My answer? "it depends." It depends on what you're tracking, the reason you're tracking, and if you're using the information correctly.

What to track: The top 5 things I recommend tracking are foods and portions you're consuming, hunger and satiety cues before and after you eat, your emotions at the time of eating, and where you ate. These 5 things give more details to patterns and understanding why you're eating what you're eating and the amount you're eating. Counting calories and/or macros can be helpful but leave out a lot of necessary details to making healthier eating habits. It also leaves out a lot of the other nutrients our bodies need. Not all calories are created equal.

Why should/shouldn't you track your intake: Tracking all or part of the top 5 can be a great tool to become more aware of the food you're eating and why you're eating it. The awareness is the foundation of behavior change when people don't know where to start with changing their eating habits. There can also be some serious downfalls to tracking intake. Tracking food, especially calories/macros can become an obsession...in a very unhealthy way. People can get so fixated on needing to know the calorie content of every bite in their mouth that it can cause significant distress on your mental and physical health. Food turns into a number and stripped of the enjoyment it brings or the nutrients it provides. Tracking can trigger disordered eating thoughts/behaviors and perfectionism and can be more harmful than helpful to some people.

What to do with your food logs: Tracking intake is not a long-term behavior. The purpose of tracking is not to mindlessly enter your food while waiting for your app to tell you if you're doing ok or not. The purpose is to learn more of your behaviors so you rely on yourself and not your app to tell you what, when, or how much you need to eat. After a couple days of tracking, do some reflection on the data you collected. This is not to blame yourself. It's to help you learn why you do what you do. Let's say you

notice every day at 2pm you eat 2 candy bars and this is something you'd like to change. Reflect on what's going on during that time. Were you hungry? Is it in response to an emotion you're feeling? Is it the environment you're in at that time? How does your body feel after eating them? Reflecting on these can help you figure out a behavior change strategy to get to the core of your choices. Continuing our example- you notice you're not actually hungry but you're stressed. A great place to start is to work on coping methods for your stress instead of simply will-powering your way through not eating the candy bars. For example, go for a walk, do a mindful break, text a friend, put on your favorite music. As you incorporate more stress relieving activities, you won't be relying on those candy bars anymore.

Working on behavior changes is the foundation of what I do with my patients. If you don't know where to start or would like some guidance, I'd be happy to see you at HCMH!