

# DEAR PHOTO DIARY

Would Bridget Jones have been skinnier if she had used a cellphone to record what she ate? **Claire Keeton** investigates the latest diet fad

**W**ITH the new “camera diet”, participants snap everything they eat with their cellphones, or any camera to hand.

But don't be fooled — the “camera diet” is not as effortless as it sounds. In fact, it is the labour of taking pictures of everything they eat that makes people more conscious of their eating habits.

Participants in one camera-diet study reported that the extra effort of recording the snack or second helping of food made them think about whether they should really eat it. So they were prompted to eat less and make better choices — or so they said.

“[The camera] curbed my choices. It didn't alter them completely, but who wants to take a photo of a jumbo bag of M&Ms

and write it down?”, one volunteer in the study commented.

Another said: “Sometimes I felt tempted to have a snack, but I

## GET FIT WITH A CELLPHONE

HI-TECH cellphones with an application called “Ubifit” are motivating people to stick to their exercise routine, one study at the University of Washington has found. The Ubifit application monitors participants' training routines. The applications use an external sensing device and could run on phones with built-in accelerometers, such as the iPhone.

— Source: *The University of Washington*

decided against it because I was too lazy to record it.”

The pilot study, *Think Before You Eat*, by Lydia Zepeda and David Deal from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “revealed that photographic food diaries can alter attitudes and behaviours associated with food choices”.

Volunteers identified three “negative behaviours” when looking at a week of photo diaries: eating excessively, imprudent snacking on biscuits, sweets and junk food and failing to eat a nutritionally balanced diet.

The concept of camera diets and using websites, or blogs, to track one's health and lose weight is gaining popularity.

A group of 19-year-old teenagers who are being tracked from birth to age 20 — with about 3 000 parti-



## SNAP JUDGMENTS IN SOWETO

THE Birth to Twenty study reported regular fast-food intake when it conducted a sub-study among 655 of the Soweto participants, aged 17. Among the findings were:

- On three or more occasions 89% ate fast-food items.
- The "kota" (bunny chow, right) was the most popular fast-food choice, followed by vetkoek and fried chips.
- The kota (5 185kJ) had far more energy than a Big Mac meal (4 038kJ) and amounted to roughly half the required daily calories for a 17-year-old.

Despite these findings, most of the participants were within a normal body-mass index range. Dr Shane Morris, a senior Bt20 researcher from the Wits paediatrics department, said that they are conducting a sub-study with 120 of the female teenagers, their best friends and mothers. The cellphones are used as a tool to jolt their memories and assist the in-depth interviews. Norris said: "The photos prompt them on where and why they were eating so we get context, and on the contents of what they were eating."



**HARD CELL:** Mobile diets may be tough, but they work a treat

Participants in this South Africa's longest-running child and adolescent health study — are using their cellphone cameras to evaluate their eating patterns.

A US-based dietician, Cristin Dillon-Jones, who posts pictures of everything she eats or drinks on her Eat Like Me blog on [Self.com](#), receives many hits. She said that snapping her consumption influenced both her portion sizes and nutritional choices.

"Since I have to take the photograph I have to plate [dish up] the food and this forces me to choose a portion size before I start to eat," Dillon-Jones said. "It also makes me think before I take seconds . . . if I am hungry, I will always take more, but sometimes the pause to think about it (and get the camera) is a good way to

realise whether you actually need that second helping."

Dillon-Jones, who walks every day and runs a few times a week, added: "My blog has not changed the way I eat, but it does help me to have more variety in my diet, particularly with fruits and vegetables. I feel the blog is a welcome reminder and motivation that there is a way I should eat each day for good health — sometimes you just need that little push to do it day-in and day-out."

Now a scientific trial in India is designing software that can better analyse digital pictures of meals. Explaining their project, Professor Carol Boushey from Purdue University's department of foods and nutrition, stated: "Using cameras to evaluate your diet by

snapping pictures of your meals is not new.

"What makes our proposal different is that we're designing

## CELLPHONES FOR SAVING LIVES

SMSes are a vital tool for reminding patients with TB, Aids and other chronic diseases to take their daily medicines on time. Organisations like Cell-Life and cities like Cape Town have pioneered these initiatives and shown they improve drug adherence. Major NGOs also use SMSes to promote HIV prevention.

— Source: *Cell-Life*

## CELLPHONES AND HEALTH

ALISTAIR van Heerden from the Human Sciences Research Council said he is planning to use cellphones to research a broader health topic — risk behaviour among the Bt20 cohort. He said Bt20 expected to launch this pilot study next month, which will use cellphones to collect sensitive data on day-to-day behaviour, including smoking, drinking and sexual activity. "[Volunteers] can more easily disclose sensitive information and this research would be asking questions in real time."

## CELLPHONES A PAIN IN THE NECK

SENDING SMSes using one thumb instead of two increases the risk of neck, arm and hand pain. A Swedish study of young people showed that half of them using a single thumb to send an SMS experienced neck, arm and hand pain, while the others in the group did not. The lead researcher, ergonomist Ewa Gustafsson, found those with pain were more likely to use a single thumb at higher speed and give the thumb fewer breaks. "Those with symptoms more often text-messaged hunched over. Just like when using a computer, such posture should be avoided," she advised. She suggested that people vary their position, avoid hunching over, rest their forearms, do not type too fast, use both thumbs and give them a break during long messages.

— Source: *Thesis presented to the University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

