Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Learn more about your food with Food-A-Pedia

I've started to plan meals for a week at a time to help streamline my grocery shopping. Since I'm trying to drop a few pounds, I'd like to do some quick legwork to compare calories in some foods I eat regularly. If I wait to look at Nutrition Facts labels while shopping, I feel like I'm in the store forever. Any ideas that could help?

There is plenty of information online that could help you track down the calories and nutrients in foods, but one that might be particularly easy to use — and is free — is Food-A-Pedia, which is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's SuperTracker website.

With SuperTracker, you can plug in information to get a personalized nutrition and physical activity plan. To get a personalized plan, you need to sign up and provide profile information. But anyone can use many of SuperTracker's features, including Food-A-Pedia.

Food-A-Pedia includes information on 8,000 foods and beverages, and you can easily compare two items side by side.

Just go to supertracker.usda.gov/foodapedia.aspx. You'll find a search box where you can enter a food item. Include the category ("Fruits," "Vegetables," or "Pasta and Rice," for example) to narrow down the number of results that come up.

After you find the first food, you can conduct another search to find the second food item to make your comparison.

For example, let's say you want to compare the calories and nutrients in poultry and fish. First, in the search box, enter the type of poultry you normally eat — let's say chicken — and choose the

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result that most closely matches your typical meal, perhaps "Chicken, breast, boneless, skinless, baked." The results will appear immediately to the right on your screen. Then, go back to the search box and type in the type of fish you normally consume — let's say cod. Choose the result that most closely matches how you prepare cod, perhaps "Cod, baked or broiled, without fat." The results appear in the box next to the chicken breast entry.

Now you can easily compare the calories, saturated fat, added sugars and sodium of those two items. You'll see that a medium-sized chicken breast provides 141 calories, whereas a typical cod fillet provides just 93 calories. You can also adjust the amounts of each food to compare, changing the measures — to "ounces," for example — to allow you to compare the same amount of each food: 4 ounces of chicken breast provides 184 calories, whereas 4 ounces of cod provides 113 calories.

Of course, not all food items are listed in Food-A-Pedia. If you find yourself running into glitches, there are many other free apps and websites that can also give you such information. Compare notes with friends and family members to find out what they might be using. Becoming more informed about the food you eat is worth the legwork.

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