

FIVE IDEAS FOR HELPING YOU SELECT A

NUTRITION DATABASE



An e-book from *esha* RESEARCH



SELECTING A NUTRITION DATABASE

Congratulations!

You have developed a nutrition application and are looking for the database that best complements your creation. Now comes the daunting task of sifting through the many databases available for licensing.

Go online, read what the nutrition database licensing companies have to say about their products, and use the information you glean to narrow your choices down to a manageable number.

At this point, it's time to drill down a little more and pinpoint the one that's right for you.

So, how exactly do you do that?

We have some ideas.





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Avoid Crowd-Sourced Data

While there are certainly some examples of successful crowd-sourced enterprises – Wikipedia comes to mind – you probably don't want to use crowd-sourced data for something as important as your nutrition business. This may seem obvious, however, some start-ups are out there creating massive databases built on information sent in from consumers via pictures of food or scanned labels, or, yes, guesswork. Often there is little to no oversight or data checking when information is accumulated this way, leading to inaccurate data or duplicate items.





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But, many of these databases are attractive to businesses because they can be licensed cheaply. So, if you run across a large and inexpensive database, be cautious.

Ask these questions:

Where did you get your data?

You don't want to hear, "Other users submit it. Either they send us a recipe with the nutrition breakdown or they send us a scanned picture of the package label." You should avoid data that has not been vetted by food composition professionals.

What did you do to ensure your information is accurate?

You don't want to hear, "We look at it to make sure it makes sense" or "When we type it in, we make sure that what we type matches the scan."

What about duplication? Will there be more than one of the same item?

You don't want to hear, "Yeah. That happens."

In addition, the collection of crowd-sourced data typically relies on bar scanning technology, which works great for grocery-store items, but excludes items without bar codes, like fresh produce or restaurant items.

Instead, look for databases compiled from reputable sources such as the latest USDA Standard Reference database, data solicited directly from manufacturers and restaurants, data from literature sources, and others.

How is it organized?

You don't want to hear, "By ... name?"

How frequently is the data updated?

You don't want to hear, "Whenever people send in new stuff."



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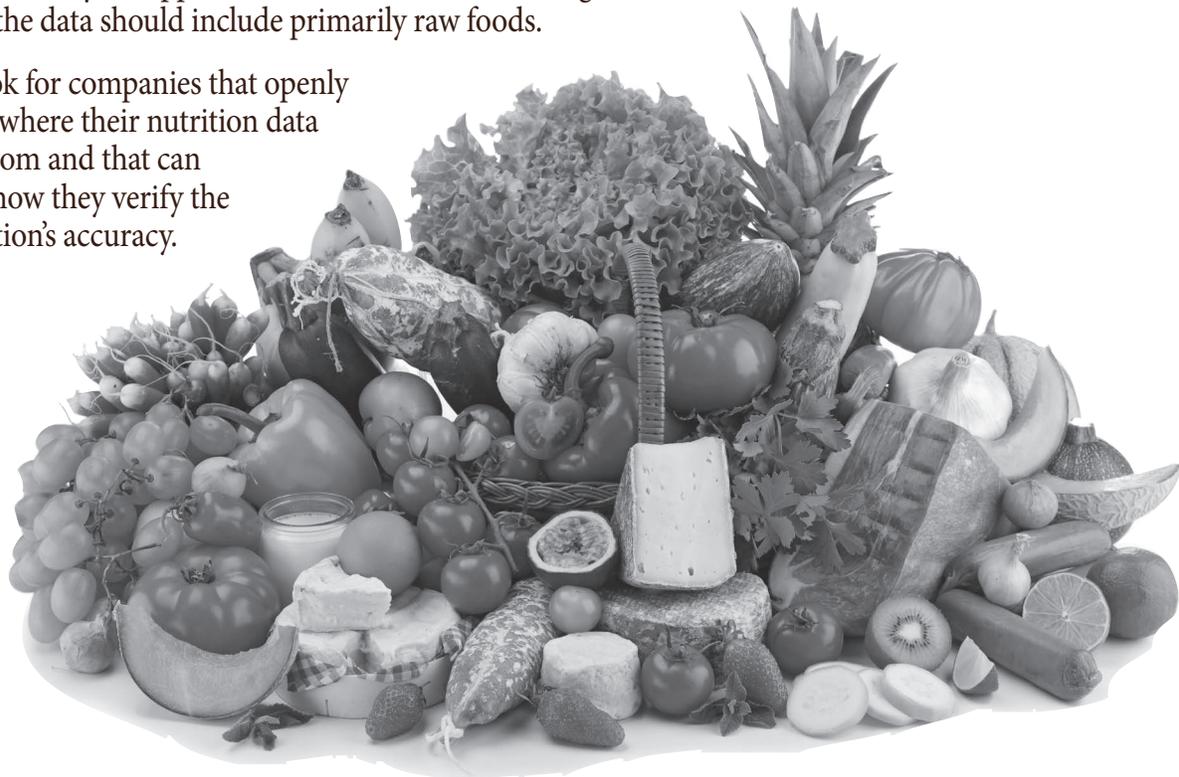
Look for Variety

A high-quality nutrition database will have a wide variety of foods and ingredients. Most businesses will either let you access a printout of the database items (without the nutrient breakdown) or give you a random sampling of the data so you can get an idea of what's included.

You'll want to make sure that all food types are represented. Make sure there are unpackaged items (fruits, vegetables, meats, etc.) and not just an abundance of processed, packaged foods, for example. Or, look for processing items, if you're marketing a product to food producers.

However, you should also make sure that the food selection matches your target audience's needs. If you are building a consumer application, for example, you will want an assortment of name brand foods. If your application will be used for building recipes, the data should include primarily raw foods.

Also, look for companies that openly disclose where their nutrition data comes from and that can explain how they verify the information's accuracy.





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And, once again, it's a good rule of thumb to pick up the phone and ask:

Where did you get your data?

You want to hear, "Government sources, food councils, journal articles, and directly from manufacturers."

What do you do to ensure your information is correct?

You want to hear, "We use a variety of mathematical checks to ensure that the calories are correct and that the proximates, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals are accurate."

What about duplication? Will there be more than one of the same item?

You want to hear, "There are no duplicates from the same source, although government databases sometimes provide data for brand name or restaurant items that we also receive directly from the manufacturer. Source information is reported for each food so that you know where that data comes from."

How is it organized?

You want to hear, "Our libraries use a cataloging system that organizes the foods by a variety of factors."

How frequently is the data updated?

You want to hear, "Maintaining and adding to the database is an ongoing, daily occurrence. We add new foods, verify existing foods, and remove outdated foods."



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Focus on Quality Over Quantity

It's important to know the health of the database. If the database has old or outdated foods, that helps no one. Make sure the database is updated and added to regularly and that foods no longer on the market get removed from the database.

When comparing numbers, make sure the databases you are evaluating are not artificially increasing their numbers by counting different serving sizes (such as 12 fl oz, 64 fl oz) as separate foods. However, check that each food offers a variety of serving sizes for analysis (such as 1 piece, or 1 cup).

Possibly the most important aspect to consider when selecting a nutrient database is the integrity of the data. This includes:

- Visual and mathematical checks: Do the numbers, as they say, add up?
- Consistent and functional naming: You don't want a database that uses disparate naming conventions for its items; this will make accurate searches nearly impossible.
- Attention to food trends: Researchers should be aware of movements in the nutrition industry – like the current desire for gluten-free foods – and the data should reflect this.



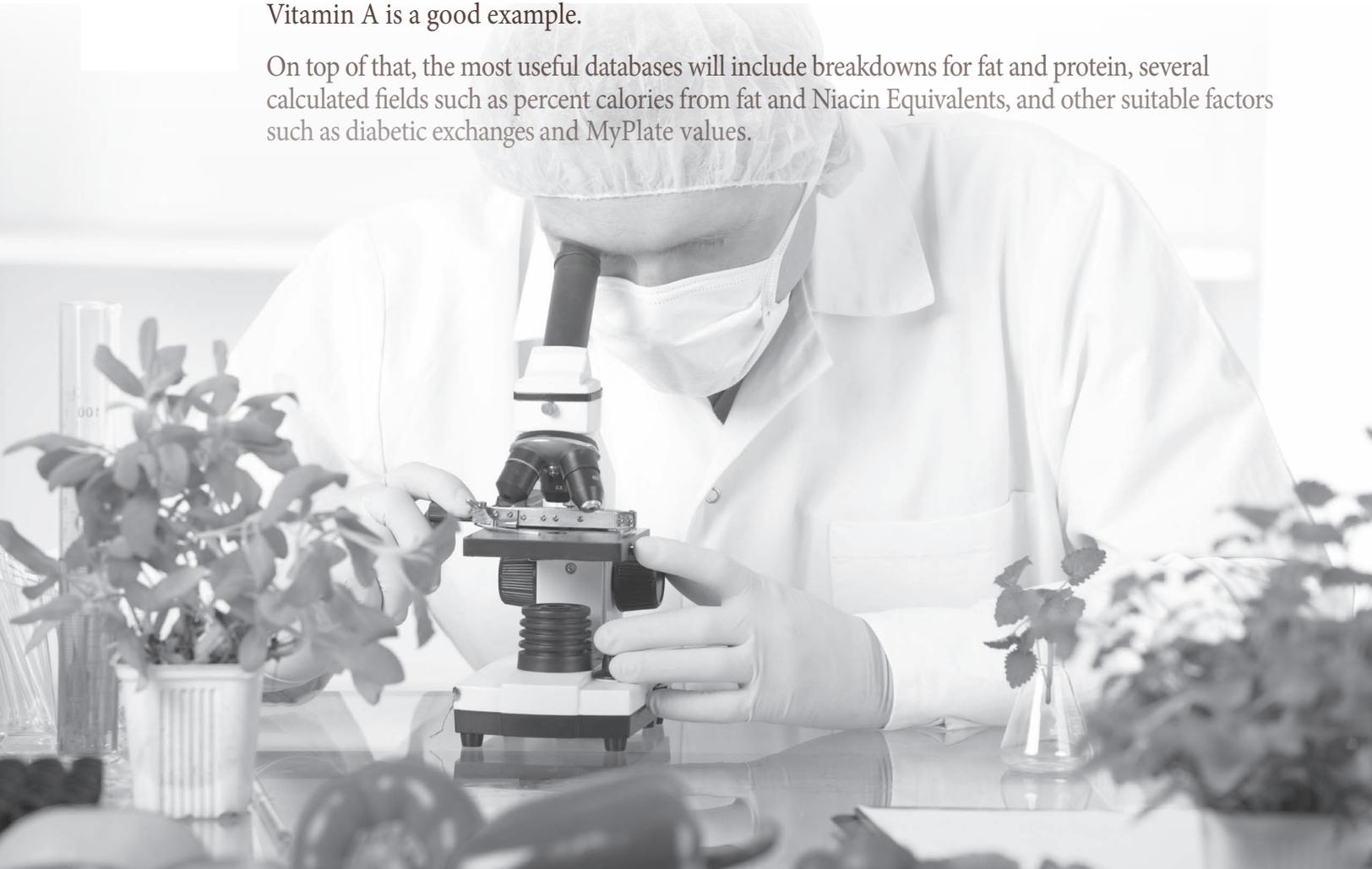
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Ask About the Nutrient Profile

Nutrient information for calories, fat, carbohydrates, and protein might be enough for the layman, but professionals need a database that includes all of the vitamins and minerals, including units of measure appropriate for what you're trying to accomplish — IU vs. RAE for Vitamin A is a good example.

On top of that, the most useful databases will include breakdowns for fat and protein, several calculated fields such as percent calories from fat and Niacin Equivalents, and other suitable factors such as diabetic exchanges and MyPlate values.





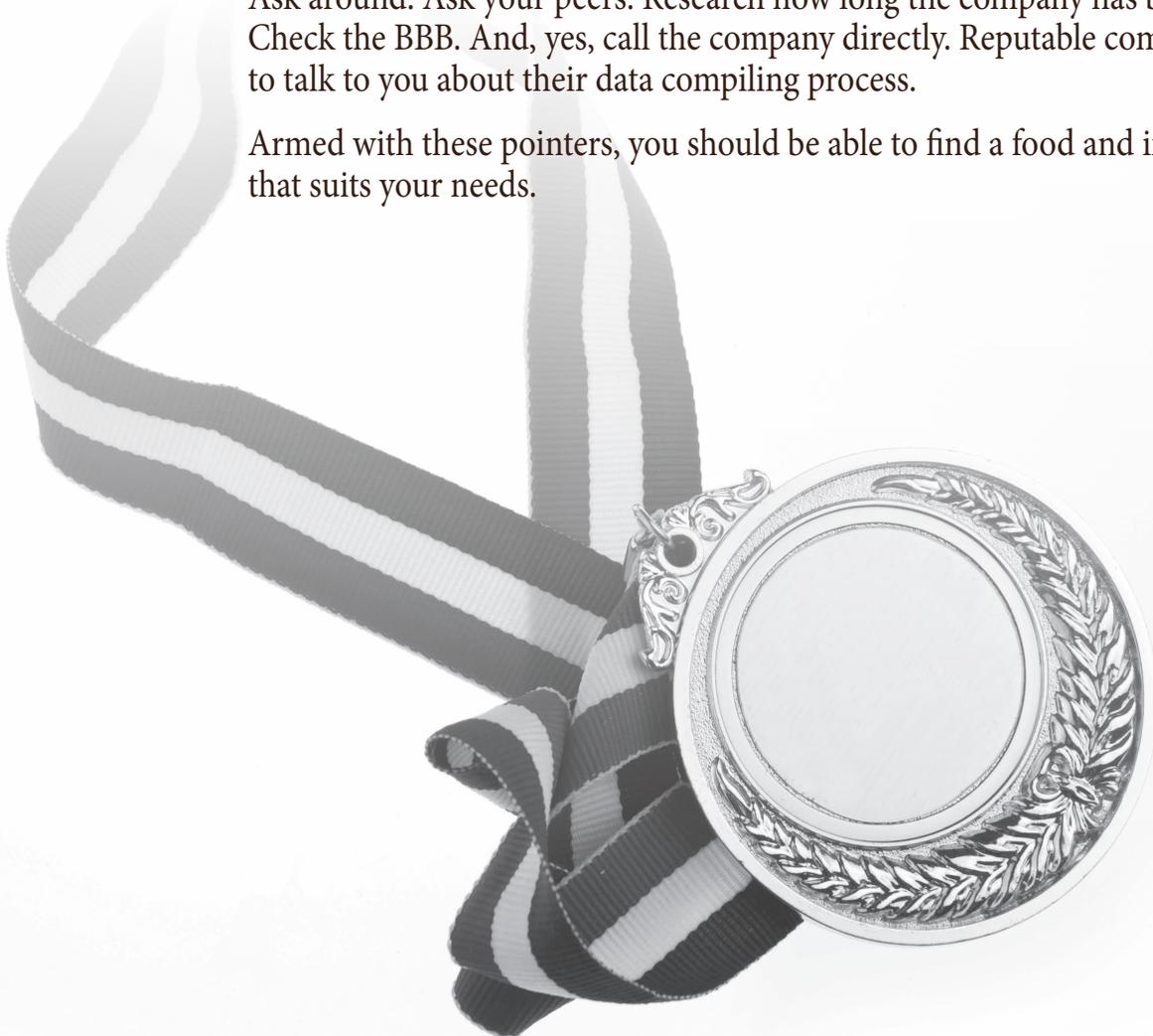
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Assess the Company's Reputation

Assuming you have found a database from more than one company that fits the criteria we suggest, you have one more thing to consider: The company's reputation.

Ask around. Ask your peers. Research how long the company has been in business. Check the BBB. And, yes, call the company directly. Reputable companies will be happy to talk to you about their data compiling process.

Armed with these pointers, you should be able to find a food and ingredient database that suits your needs.





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esha RESEARCH

ESHA Research has been the leading provider of nutrition databases, food and supplement labeling, and nutrition analysis software solutions for more than 30 years. Our team of consultants are knowledgeable in nutrition, labeling, and regulatory compliance, ensuring your unique needs are met.

If we can be of assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us:

info@esha.com

1-800-659-3742 option 2

503-585-6242 option 2