New Users: Nutrient Database Features

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A nutrient database is a collection of interrelated data about foods and constituents of foods stored together without unnecessary redundancy to serve one or more applications in an optimal fashion. These data are independent of software programs that access the data. A nutrient database may also have data included that are related to the foods which are used for identification and documentation.

The major components of a nutrient database system include: 1) a nutrient database; 2) access and calculation software; and 3) reporting software. Selecting a nutrient database system requires careful evaluation of each of these components in relationship to the specific goals and objectives of the user's work environment. Some questions to investigate when evaluating nutrient database systems are listed below:

1. What is the primary data source?
2. What nutrients are included?
3. How many foods are included?
4. Are there mixed dishes, recipes or ethnic foods?
5. How are missing values handled?
6. How are additions to the primary database done?
7. How is the database maintained?
8. What documentation is available?
9. Is there user support?
10. Are custom services available?
11. What hardware does the program require?
12. What are the data storage capabilities?
13. What is the response time?
14. What features does the software have?
15. How is data entry completed?
16. What analysis options are there?
17. Are there comparison data?
18. Can custom features be added?
19. How many users does the software support?
20. What printers are supported?
21. What are the costs?
22. Does the system meet the user needs and objectives?

This list of questions may be used as an aid in exploring available nutrient database systems. It is important to always separate the evaluation of the quality and quantity of the nutrient database from the evaluation of the features of the software programs which access these data. Although it is easy to be distracted in the review of software applications which streamline the access and reporting tasks, remember that the credibility of reports are dependent on the quality of the nutrient database.

In summary, the assessment of dietary intake using any methodology is dependent on having a quality nutrient database. The selection of a nutrient database requires the knowledge of the goals and objectives of the project. As well, selection of the software to utilize a nutrient database requires careful evaluation in order to achieve project goals. Finally, the development of a nutrient database system is a commitment to the future, and requires long-range planning and maintenance.