

Healthcare Innovation NEWS

Thought Leaders' Corner

Q. Have Digital Monitors, Such as Fitbit, Run Their Course in Providing Benefits to Users?

Employers have a new tool to help them reward employees who take care of their health: wearable fitness trackers. Wearable fitness trackers are small devices worn around the wrist or clipped onto clothing that track a user's daily activity. They are paired with an app or website that logs information and gives users a snapshot of actual physical activity. A 2014 study published in *Science & Medicine* shows that people tend to overestimate how much exercise they get each week by more than 50 minutes, and they underestimate sedentary time by more than two hours. By using a wearable device, people are better able to monitor and hold themselves accountable for their physical activity. Because physical activity delivers a number of health benefits, including lower risk of diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure, health plans are now taking advantage of wearable technology to improve employee wellness programs. For example, UnitedHealthcare Motion™ is a wellness program that provides employees with a wearable device (at no additional charge) that tracks their activity and shows them the frequency, intensity and total steps taken each day. Employees can earn up to \$4 each day for hitting specific walking goals, which adds up to \$1,460 per year. The financial incentives are deposited into health reimbursement or health saving accounts, enabling people to pay deductibles and other health expenses. By providing access to activity trackers and encouraging their use with financial incentives, wearable devices will become an ular part of wellness programs.



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On the contrary, we're only just beginning to realize the potential of these devices in improving people's health! These devices will play a significant role in helping medical providers deliver high-quality care in the face of healthcare reform. For example, when patients have hip surgery and are sent home to complete recovery after a short rehab stay in a skilled nursing facility, they can wind up back in the hospital because they don't continue to carefully follow a longitudinal care plan and discharge regimen.

Now imagine if patients' Fitbits were synced to their electronic health records, allowing their doctors to monitor in-home recovery. By checking daily steps (as well as other vital statistics such as heart rate and sleep patterns), doctors could better understand whether patients are progressing as anticipated or might require additional services to recover. This gives them greater insight into their patients' overall health, provides patients a better care experience and preempts the need for more intensive treatment, thereby, reducing hospital readmissions and health costs. And this technology doesn't end with Fitbits; it works with a host of other devices, wireless scales and glucometers. Imagine the possibilities!

This scenario is not only possible today; it is available today. It's built into CareCommunity, the role-based, health management and care coordination platform we've developed to help long-term, post-acute care providers deliver integrated care and better outcomes. We truly believe this will revolutionize senior care.



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Millennials may feel these devices have run their course but for the senior population, the market has hardly scratched the surface. Wearables collect incredibly valuable data about heart rate, sleep patterns, calories burned, unusual drops in activity and more. They also often report data visually, allowing users to track their activity progress in a clear and simple way. This is huge for older adults moving toward healthier lifestyles. In addition, wearables with emergency buttons can offer instant access to emergency services if a health problem arises.

However, fitness tracking and emergency services are only the beginning of what can make a difference for this market. The real impact will be on healthcare outcomes. The ability to transmit health and fitness data to healthcare providers enables earlier interventions should a health condition escalate. This will be achieved through the addition of predictive analytics and biosensing technology, such as digital blood pressure monitors and glucose and cholesterol sensors. These features, which provide real-time data to users and healthcare providers, can identify health issues earlier (before an incident occurs) and reduce hospital readmissions.



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The short answer is no, but it is much more complex than that. Wearable technology is evolving; users of these devices need to familiarize themselves with the regular updates that are provided from wearables and then respond accordingly to digital feedback. Only then can users fully reap the benefits digital monitors offer.

There has been recent coverage on studies that show the lack of effectiveness of wearables for losing weight; however, the 2015 PACE-Lift trial study¹ proved inconclusive. Although it continued for a good length of time, the sample size of the participants was fairly small (298 participants from 250 households), and the age range was very limited (60 to 75 years old).

Digital monitors are likely more effective in varying age groups, and I believe that skews younger people. I think that users under 40 are more prone to the acceptance of these devices. There certainly is a generational gap to keep in mind, but users across all generations can be trained to correctly use wearables.

It is also important to consider what would have happened to the health of participants if they had not used wearables. Although the study implies that wearables did not help individuals lose weight, what were the benefits? Did it improve their cardio health, maintain their weight or was it something else entirely? We have to look at an individual's overall health ecosystem.

¹ Harris T, Kerry SM, Victor CR, et al. "A Primary Care Nurse-Delivered Walking Intervention in Older Adults: PACE-Lift (Pedometer Accelerometer Consultation Evaluation) Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial." *PLOS Medicine*. Feb. 17, 2015.



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