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Steven Ecklund, MD
Rheumatologist
Fitness tracking bands

FitBit, Misfit and Jawbone may sound like names for underground punk rock bands, but they are actually at the forefront of the health revolution.

These and many other athletic brands have carved out a niche in the fast-growing segment of wearable fitness-tracking devices becoming popular with people looking to gauge their exercise, eating and sleeping habits.

Designed to be worn like watches or simply stowed away in your pocket, wearable devices are your new workout partner, helping you count calories, steps and other metrics throughout your day. Each brand has a different take on its approach to fitness tracking, so do a little research before purchasing a new device, some of which can cost hundreds of dollars.

THE TREND

Fitness trackers are the hottest wearable devices on the market, accounting for 72 percent of all digital fitness device sales, according to the Consumer Electronics Association. The numbers only look to increase as companies use consumer feedback to refine their products.

The wearable technology in these devices is the catalyst behind the segment’s growth, as people can more accurately than ever record what is happening with their bodies. Walking, running, eating and sleeping habits are all measurable with the devices, which also can send you daily, weekly and monthly breakdowns of your performance.

MOTIVATION

Consumers are buying wearable devices for many reasons. One of the most prevalent is the motivation they can provide for more beneficial workouts, better eating and healthier sleep. With the versatility of the devices – some brands are even waterproof – you can track your workout activities from running and tennis to basketball and swimming.

There’s a wearable fitness product for almost every budget. While the top-tier products can range into the $200 to $300 range, many basic fitness trackers begin around $30.

Personal style also is a driving factor behind the sales of fitness bands, as companies have worked to improve the aesthetics of their products with smaller sizes and more modern colors.
Keep Your Bones Strong

When you think physical health, consider parts of the body you can’t see.

Sitting beneath the surface are the vital pieces making up the ultimate structure of your body — the bones. They play many crucial roles in the body, including protection of organs, anchoring of muscles and storage of calcium.

THE NUMBERS
Why is bone health so important? The Office of the Surgeon General reports an assortment of statistics that call for healthier, bone-focused diets to help the country’s population.

How likely you are to develop osteoporosis — a condition that causes bones to become weak and brittle — depends on a variety of lifestyle, diet and exercise factors. According to the Surgeon General:

- The risk of a fracture increases with age and is greatest in women. In fact, roughly four in 10 Caucasian women ages 50 or older in the United States will experience a hip, spine or wrist fracture sometime during the remainder of their lives.

- Osteoporosis is the most common cause of fractures. Roughly 10 million individuals over age 50 in the United States have osteoporosis of the hip.

- By 2020, one in two Americans over age 50 is expected to have or be at risk of developing osteoporosis of the hip.

CALCIUM, VITAMIN D
Calcium is a mineral needed by the body for healthy bones. Since the body cannot produce calcium, it must be absorbed through food or vitamins.

Good sources can include low-fat dairy products, dark green leafy vegetables and calcium-fortified products such as orange juice, cereal and bread.

The daily recommended amount of calcium varies for individuals, so check with your physician.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
Bones also can be strengthened through regular physical activity. Weight-bearing physical activities cause muscles and bones to work against gravity. This can be strenuous, so consult your physician before increasing the amount of weight-bearing exercises.

These exercises can include simple walking, jogging or running.
Family workout time

The workday is done and dinner is in the oven. Exercise may be the last thing on your mind, but experts say family workout time is crucial to forming togetherness and improving overall health, especially in young kids.

According to the national fitness program Let’s Move, children should get a total of 60 minutes of physical activity each day, and adults need at least 30. And exercise has never been more important to protecting children from incurring preventable illnesses later in life. Childhood obesity rates have tripled since the 1980s, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At this rate, one third of all children born in 2000 or later will suffer from diabetes at some point in their lives. Here are some ideas for finding time for a family workout, even if your schedule seems too packed to fit it in.

TAKE A WALK
A brisk walk is a great way to burn calories and increase your heart rate. The great thing about taking a walk is you can do so no matter where you live.

People in large cities can pop out of their apartments for a quick stroll downtown, while people in more rural areas can stretch out their legs in their own backyards or down a safe country road.

You only need a pair of comfortable shoes, a stroller or carrying sling.
Maintaining a healthy diet that includes all the recommended vitamins and nutrients can be a challenge, particularly when the current food landscape is full of overly processed foods that rarely contain essential nutrients. Supplements can provide a great way to enhance a healthy diet with those elements you might be missing, but how do you go about figuring out what you need?

When looking for supplements, keep in mind these tips from Registered Dietitian Paul Kriegler, Life Time weight loss and training supplementation expert:

1. Read the label: Nutrient forms can vary dramatically from one like product to another. The nutrient form not only determines the price of a product, but also influences whether that nutrient will be absorbed or not. Look for methylcobalamin over cyanocobalamin, natural folate (5-methyl-tetra-hydro-folate) over folic acid, and mineral bisglycinates over cheaper carbonate and oxide forms.

2. Know your needs: Each body functions differently and has different supplemental needs.

3. Look for certification: There are several certifications you can look for to ensure the supplements you buy follow a good manufacturing process and contain high quality ingredients. Certifications to look for include: Current Good Manufacturing Practices (CGMP), Therapeutic Goods of Australia (TGA), National Science Foundation (NSF) and United States Pharmacopeia (USP). For fish oil, look for International Fish Oil Standards (IFOS).

4. Be wary of over-promising in the messaging: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is when it comes to supplements promoting weight-loss miracles. Supplements are designed to enhance missing nutrients from a daily diet that the body needs. So if the label or commercial is promising a huge change in your life, be suspicious and don’t waste your money.
SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Each time 81-year-old Bill Dworsky or his 80-year-old wife Dorothy opens the refrigerator, closes the bathroom door or lifts the lid on a pill container, tiny sensors in their San Francisco home make notes on a digital logbook.

The couple’s 53-year-old son, Phil, checks it daily on his smartphone. If there’s no activity during a designated time, the younger Dworsky gets an automated email, so he can decide whether to call or stop by. “This is peace of mind, really,” he says of the system.

The Silicon Valley tech executive lives just across town, but the sensors help him keep an eye on his aging parents while also raising a teenage daughter and frequently traveling for work. While his parents don’t need a lot of assistance, they have stopped driving and his father uses a cane.

“I want to be in the position where I will know when I need to step in,” he says.

Advances in low-cost sensors and wireless net-
works are fueling a boom in the so-called “smart” home. And companies are looking beyond home security and temperature control to creating products for Baby Boomers trying to balance caring for aging parents and respecting their independence. It’s a new twist on the notion of personal alarms, such as the Life Alert system that gained popularity with “Help, I’ve fallen and can’t get up” advertisements.

These systems often use simple, inexpensive components such as accelerometers that know when an object is moved. Others use small power sensors to track electricity use or contact circuits that tell when a door is open or closed. Companies like Lively, Evermind and BeClose charge $50 to $300 for a set of sensors and $30 to $70 a month for wireless monitoring. Each promises to safeguard clients’ personal information.

A set of motion sensors from San Francisco-based Lively seemed right for the Dworskys, whose son calls them “fiercely independent.” Before hearing about Lively, Phil had raised the idea of a webcam in their home. “They immediately didn’t want it. It was a privacy violation,” he said. But they agreed to sensors that collect “a more limited set of information.”

Dorothy doesn’t think much about the system tracking her daily routine.

“It’s un-intrusive. That’s what we like about it,” she said. “We want to be able to stay in our home, and this is one way that makes it possible.”

Electronic tracking does raise issues around dignity and privacy, says Dr. Christine Ritchie, a geriatrics professor at the University of California, San Francisco. She believes some concerns will diminish as more people get used to using fitness bands, “smart” thermostats and other gadgets that track their daily lives, though. And independence is attractive.

“Many of my older patients would be totally unenthusiastic about having anyone monitor any part of their life,” says Ritchie. “But some would be grateful for the prospect of continuing to live in their own home, rather than an institution where they have less control.”

Michigan resident Vicki White, 62, was taken aback when her daughter, who lives in Florida, suggested an Evermind system that uses power sensors to track how often appliances such as coffee makers, lamps or televisions are used.

White’s health is good, but she lives in a rural area without close neighbors. White’s own mother had lived alone and struggled with Alzheimer’s disease that wasn’t detected right away.

“I thought maybe she thought I was flipping out,” White says of her daughter, 42-year-old Melanie Champion. “She explained that she just wanted to know I was OK and my routine was as it should be. It’s actually very comforting because I know she’s concerned.”

An app on Champion’s smartphone shows when her mother starts her coffee pot in the morning and when she turns off the TV before going to bed at night.

“It’s really nice, except she wants to lecture me about how late I stay up at night,” White laughs. “I have to reassure her that I fell asleep on the couch.”

Before installing sensors, seniors and their families should have a frank talk about privacy and how much help they need, say experts.

“This type of technology can help, but it’s not the only answer or solution,” says Lynn Friss Feinberg of the American Association of Retired Persons. “Older adults need conversation, social engagement and access to a range of supportive services. And hugs.”
Sharing health data

Are you concerned with where your healthcare data is ending up?

An NPR-Truven Health Analytics Health Poll found that data privacy didn’t appear to bother most respondents. The study found that privacy concerns were highest regarding information held by health insurers, but even then only 16 percent of people expressed any real worry about how that information may be used.

The study interviewed thousands of people by cellphone, landline and online. A majority of the people asked (53 percent) said they would be willing to share information anonymously with health care researchers.

Who’s Using Your Data?

Researchers in government, universities, drug companies or consulting firms are a few examples of potential landing spots for your medical data. Here’s what the NPR-Truven Health Analytics poll found regarding who could be using your data:

■ Comfort with researchers possessing critical data ran between 87 and 92 percent
■ Ninety-five percent of sharing-inclined people under 35 were OK with giving anonymized data to professors, while only 74 percent of people 65 and older were

What to Do About It

If you are concerned about where your data is being distributed, you, as a consumer, have the right to raise questions. Most information about the use of your data can be found within the privacy policy provided your insurance, physician or hospital. If you’re still confused about the process after reading through the privacy policies, here are some questions you can ask your provider:

■ Will I be notified every time you share information about me?
■ Is my medical information available to anyone other than my medical providers and insurance companies?
■ What will health insurers do with my records? Can companies other than my policy provider access my records?
■ Is my data used for any purpose other than to provide my medical information to my providers?

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According to the CDC, younger children are more likely to sustain injuries from scald burns that are caused by hot liquids or steam, while older children are more likely to sustain injuries from flame burns that are caused by direct contact with fire.

**SOUND THE ALARM**
Installing smoke alarms in your home — on every floor and near all rooms family members sleep in — should be a given. Testing and maintaining them can be some things that people overlook.

It’s important to test your smoke alarms once a month to make sure they’re working properly. Most devices have a simple test button that you can access without even taking the device down from the wall. These few seconds per month devoted to testing your devices can help safeguard the lives of your family members.

**PREVENT BURNS**
In terms of burns, the most dangerous room in the house is the kitchen. Use safe cooking practices, such as never leaving food unattended on the stove. Supervise or restrict a child’s use of stoves, ovens or microwaves.

If anyone is burned in your home, it is important to know what type of burn it is and how to treat it. A first-degree burn is the least serious type in which only the outer layer of skin is burned. Second-degree burns involve both the first and layers of skin being burned. Third-degree burns are the most serious and can cause permanent tissue damage.

For any types of burns causing serious pain, seek medical attention.

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**Protect from burns, fires**

Every day, more than 300 children up to age 19 are treated in emergency rooms for burn-related injuries, and two children die as a result.
Importance of REACH

President Obama and his administration are working to close racial and ethnic gaps in healthcare coverage.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is doing its part by leading the Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health program as part of its efforts to unify healthcare coverage throughout the country.

HEALTH GAPS
The CDC reports the following statistics when delivering its message focused on ending health gaps among racial and ethnic minority groups:

- Heart disease is the leading cause of death for people of most racial and ethnic minorities in the United States;
- Non-Hispanic blacks have the highest rates of obesity (44 percent) followed by Mexican Americans (39 percent); and
- Compared to non-Hispanic whites, the risk of diagnosed diabetes is 77 percent higher among non-Hispanic blacks, 66 percent higher among Hispanics / Latinos and 18 percent higher among Asian Americans.

WHAT REACH DOES
REACH has built up an expansive base of partners, including members of local communities that work together to identify, develop and share strategies that work in reducing health gaps.
Their main focus is on heart disease, obesity, diabetes, breast and cervical cancer, infant mortality, asthma and vaccines.

Racial and ethnic health gaps are complex. They are affected by factors related to individuals, communities, society, culture and the environment. REACH cuts across a number of proven programs that address these many factors:

GET INVOLVED
If you are part of a local health coalition, you can seek out REACH for support on planning, evaluating and sharing community-focused strategies.
Breaking down labels
Do you find yourself struggling to pick healthy options?

There are serving sizes, percentages and sometimes ingredients you’ve never heard of. Before you know it, you’re settling for something without even truly understanding what is in it.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends getting to know how the back of your labels are structured. That way, you can make informed choices about not only purchasing certain foods, but how much you’re eating, too.

CALORIES
The calories line of a nutrition label is where you’ll find the number of calories per serving and the calories from fat in each serving.

Let’s say the label says one serving equals 10 crackers and 100 calories. If you eat 20 crackers, you’ve quickly consumed two servings and twice the number of calories and fat. If you do this multiple times throughout the day with different food choices, you can see how quickly the calories can add up.

Remember that fat-free doesn’t mean calorie-free. Items with low fat content can have just as many calories as full-fat ones.

KEY NUTRIENTS
The FDA reports that many Americans aren’t getting enough vitamins A and C, potassium, calcium and iron. Look for these key nutrients when you’re reading the back of labels to make sure you’re choosing options with high percentages in these areas.

DAILY % VALUE
You will see the “% DV” designation on food labels. It is a general guide to help you link nutrients in a serving of food to your total daily diet. If a food contains only 5 percent of an important nutrient, it is giving you only a mere contribution. Aim for foods with 20 percent or higher contributions of key nutrients.

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Exercise helps the body, but brain may benefit the most

Julie Deardorff
Chicago Tribune

Exercise tones the legs, builds bigger biceps and strengthens the heart. But of all the body parts that benefit from a good workout, the brain may be the big winner.

Physical fitness directly affects our mind and plays a crucial role in the way the brain develops and functions. Moreover, exercise is linked to brain changes throughout all stages of life, beginning in infancy and lasting through old age.

Babies, for example, need regular movement to carve out critical pathways and form connections in the brain. In children, research suggests exercise improves attention, focus and academic performance. And in the elderly, exercise has been shown to help stave off memory loss associated with some forms of dementia, including Alzheimer’s disease.

“Physical activity is crucial to mind and body alike,” said neuroscientist Lise Eliot, who writes about the benefits of movement on the brain in her book “Pink Brain, Blue Brain.” “The brain benefits as much as the heart and other muscles from physical activity.”

Scientists used to believe the mind-body connection was a one-way street: The brain helped build a better physique — or else it sabotaged attempts to get to the gym. But scores of studies suggest that what’s good for the body also is nurturing the old noodle. Exercise, it turns out, can help improve cognition in ways that differ from mental brain-training games.

“We’ve found exercise has broad benefits on cognition, particularly executive functioning, including improvements in attention, working memory and the ability to multitask,” said researcher Charles Hillman, a professor of kinesiology and community health at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In fact, an active lifestyle during childhood may confer protective effects on brain health across the life span.
EXERCISE, Continued from 14

Hillman said.

How does exercise help the brain?

In the mid-1990s, Carl Cotman’s team at the University of California-Irvine first showed that exercise triggers the production of a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, which helps support the growth of existing brain cells and the development of new ones.

With age, BDNF levels fall; this decline is one reason brain function deteriorates in the elderly, according to Cotman. Certain types of exercise, namely aerobic, are thought to counteract these age-related drops in BDNF and can restore young levels of BDNF in the aging brain.

“In a sense, BDNF is like a brain fertilizer,” said Cotman, a professor of neurology and neurobiology and behavior and founding director of the Institute for Memory Impairments and Neurological Disorders (UCI Mind). “BDNF protects neurons from injury and facilitates learning and synaptic plasticity.”

Over the last two decades, researchers have learned that exercise acts on multiple levels in the brain. The brain’s wiring depends on the integrity of the brain cells or neurons, as well as the connections between the neurons, or the synapses.

As we age, the synapses are lost or break down. Cotman’s work has shown that in older rodents, exercise increases the number of synapses and also stimulates the brain to develop more neurons in the hippocampus, which he called “a critical region in learning and memory formation and a target of massive decline in Alzheimer’s disease.”

Still, for those newly created brain cells, or neurons, to work — to help us learn and remember new things — they need to be plugged into the existing neural network, said Romain Meeusen, chair of the department of human physiology at the University of Brussels.

Exercise helps integrate the new neurons into the brain’s circuitry to help improve learning, Meeusen said.

In general, exercise increases the release of neurotransmitters, or brain chemicals that relay signals between nerve cells, called neurons, Meeusen said.

“This could be one of the mechanisms of the anti-depressive effect of exercise,” he said. “It also helps to ‘train’ cognition and attention at all ages.”

Research also suggests that exercise improves blood flow to the brain and, as a result, enhances cognitive abilities. “The blood carries oxygen and feeds neural tissues, so you’re getting the benefits that come with that,” Hillman said.

The brain loves it when we move and will reward us handsomely if we do, researchers say. Here’s a look at how physical activity can be beneficial during three key stages of life.

Infancy:

Mobile children hit their cognitive milestones faster, said Eliot, an associate professor of neuroscience at Rosalind Franklin University’s Chicago Medical School.

When infants are awake, they’re in near-constant motion, which is critical for development, Eliot said. This movement “strengthens their muscles and hones their neural circuits for smooth, purposeful motor skills.”

The process continues throughout life but is most intense in infancy and toddlerhood, when children are mastering brand-new skills like sitting, standing, walking, running and jumping, Eliot said.

Pre-adolescence:

In a new twist in the debate over physical education in schools, researchers are asking an intriguing question: What if exercise improves academic success?

Some research suggests it can. Hillman’s team at the University of Illinois’ Neurocognitive Kinesiology Laboratory found that children aged 7 through 9 who participated in a 60-minute after-school exercise program had better focus, processed information more quickly and performed better on cognitive tests than children who didn’t exercise.

The researchers also found a dose effect: The more days the children attended the exercise program, the greater the changes in their brain function or cognition, according to the nine-month randomized trial, published in the journal Pediatrics in 2014.

“We didn’t take low-fit kids and make them highly fit,” Hillman said. “We took low-fit kids and made them a little less low fit. These aren’t massive changes.”

Late adulthood:

Sadly, the hippocampus naturally shrinks in late adulthood, leading to impaired memory and increased risk for dementia.

But research suggests aerobic exercise can increase the size of the hippocampus and increase levels of a protein that aids the growth of new brain cells, potentially holding off changes in the brain and improving memory function.

“Atrophy of the hippocampus in later life is generally considered inevitable,” said Kirk Erickson, professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh.

“But we’ve shown that even moderate exercise for one year can increase the size of that structure. The brain at that stage remains modifiable.”

In another study, researchers from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health found that people who said they exercised for 30 minutes five times a week in late-middle age did better on cognitive tests and showed less accumulation of the beta amyloid plaque, the protein that builds up in the brains of people with Alzheimer’s disease.

At all ages, active people did better on immediate memory and visual spatial tests and had less amyloid plaque, better brain glucose metabolism and higher hippocampus volume compared with inactive people, according to the research, published in 2014 the journal Neurology.
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