Do You Need A Fitness Gadget?

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Today it is becoming more and more common to see people wearing some type of fitness gadget, whether clipped to their waist or worn as a bracelet. You will find them being worn by everyone from Olympic athletes to weekend athletes, corporate CEOs to Hollywood's rich and famous. There are even fitness trackers for dogs! With so many gadgets out there, and new ones being introduced, it raises a flurry of questions. Are there true benefits to using a fitness gadget? Is this just a fad? If you choose one, which one is best?

One of the benefits of wearing a fitness monitor is it helps keep you motivated to monitor your health and lifestyle. It is almost be like having a personal trainer on your wrist or in your pocket. It is no secret that Americans are very sedentary. Inactivity is one of the main factors contributing to health decline. Getting motivated to move more and eat healthier can improve the quality of our lives, as well as decrease the amount of money spent on healthcare. Up to 40 percent of doctors believe that fitness monitors help patients manage their own health. These little gadgets make people more aware of their exercise and diet, and encourages them to continue to make healthy choices daily. It is not uncommon for someone to do an activity they wouldn’t have normally done in order to reach their total step goal for the day. Anything that keeps people motivated to move is a good thing!

Fitness trackers also help people create focused goals, such as walking or running a specific distance. Instead of just saying you want to lose weight or exercise more, these gadgets help you track your steps, speed, calories and sleep, thus allowing you to monitor progress toward your goals on a daily basis. For example, speed is an important goal to focus on when you walk. In order to improve overall health, you have to track your speed and make sure you are walking a minimum of a 20-minute mile and working toward a 15-minute mile or faster. Many gadgets can help monitor progress toward improving speed.

Fitness gadgets also make it possible to have a "virtual" community of workout partners to help hold you accountable and keep you on track toward your goals. Having others to share your goals with and to help challenge you will often increase consistency and results. One company CEO wanted to incorporate a wellness program and gave his employees an incentive of paying 50 percent of the cost for their fitness gadget once they had tracked 50,000 steps. Once his employees attained 1 million steps he would pay them the other 50 percent. The CEO was pleasantly surprised by the effect on his employees. Many were getting outside and walking on breaks and after work. The program helped improve the fitness of the employees, while also increasing the camaraderie among them.

However, many seem to think that these gadgets are just a passing fad. One person who uses the Jawbone UP had a "virtual" social fitness team of 25 and about half his team quit using their Jawbones. Some of the reasons for quitting were that the device broke, they didn't have the discipline to use it properly or they didn't see results and got tired of using it. Another reason many believe these gadgets to be a passing fad is the fact that earlier this year Nike discontinued their Nike FuelBand and laid off about 70-80 percent of its FuelBand hardware team.

If you choose to use a fitness tracking device which one is the best choice? According to Brent Rose in Health Tech, some of the things to look for are:

1. Does it have an altimeter? This measures elevation and will help determine between if you are just walking slowly or climbing steps.

2. How do you wear it? Typically you will wear it on your wrist, in your pocket or clip it on your waistband. Each style has its pros and cons. Pocket ones can easily get lost or washed. Wrist trackers might not be very stylish. Determine which is going to be the best style for you.

3. How do you get to the information on the tracker? The better fitness trackers have a screen and can tell you at a glance how many steps you've taken, floors climbed or calories burned. Also, the better trackers will sync wirelessly to your computer or smartphone.

Some of the top rated fitness trackers include the Fitbit Flex and the Jawbone UP24. For the more competitive exerciser, a heart rate monitor might be a better choice. I like using the Sports Tracker app on my iPhone (a free app), which gives me time, distance, pace and calories, as well as a map of the route I have taken. It can also be used to connect with friends to develop a social network of workout partners.

Whether you choose to get a fitness gadget, use a phone app or use no gadget at all make the decision to get out there and move. That is the best choice of all!