Health Apps Every Primary Care Provider Should Know About

Like it or not, technology has made its way into health care. But rather than bemoan the persistent "digital creep," learn to harness its benefits to improve your patient care. Here's how to start: with smartphone apps that can help to monitor and manage common conditions.

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We live in an ever-changing, fast-paced, and transitional world, and our health care system is no different. It's hardly surprising, then, that digital health apps are becoming more commonplace in clinical practice. Need a useful tool to help you manage or monitor your patient's chronic condition or educate them on preventive health and wellness measures? There's an app for that.

If you question or lament this continual digital creep—or think it has no bearing on your patient population—you may be surprised to know that 77% of Americans have a smartphone with texting and/or mobile application abilities, creating innovative opportunities for health care providers to incorporate health apps into patient care.[1] And the benefits are not just a sales pitch on the part of manufacturers—in fact, the American Diabetes Association's 2018 Standards of Care include a recommendation for use of mobile apps for the prevention and delayed progression of type 2 diabetes.[2] Of course, research shows that clinicians are more likely to adopt digital health tools if those tools improve practice efficiency, increase patient safety, improve diagnostic ability, help reduce burnout, and enhance patient-provider relationships.[3]

So maybe you see a role for apps in patient care. But the sheer volume and continuous proliferation of apps present an obstacle to effective evaluation and recommendation. With more than 318,000 health apps on the market and another 200 added every day, how do you know which ones are clinically sound and useful for your patients?[4] Fortunately, there are two strategies that can help you integrate digital health apps into patient care.

1 HEALTH APPS AS MEDICATIONS

Viewing health apps as if they were medications can be helpful. Think about the process we as clinicians use when we're thinking about prescribing a medication to a particular patient: we evaluate, manage, and prescribe.

Evaluate: As clinicians, we learn about the newest biopharmaceutical agents on the market to effectively govern our personal repertoire of medications and provide the best care for our patients. In this process, we evaluate clinical efficacy, safety, costs, benefits, barriers, contextual elements, caregiver impact, clinical studies, and more. This type of vetting process is also an effective approach to selecting and recommending health apps for your patients.

Manage: We each have a personal catalog of medications with which we become well versed, and comfortable, to effectively manage and help our patients with a multitude of medical conditions. This registry of medications represents our very special and individual "favorites," per se. So, create a personal repertoire of health apps to improve and manage patient care.

Prescribe: Similar to medications, many digital health apps have demonstrated impressive patient outcomes with supporting clinical evidence. So why not get comfortable with prescribing digital health applications for behavior modifications or common medical conditions, just as you would with a medication?

TABLE 1
Health Apps You Can Recommend to Patients

Name	Topic(s)	Available on	Cost	Special features/Notes
DrinkCoach www.drinkcoach.org.uk/alcohol-app-free-download-ios-android.html Originally designed by a nonprofit alcohol action charity based in the UK, DrinkCoach provides a variety of self-help/care, education resources, and tools for users to help identify, track, and change their alcohol intake. (Some resources aimed at users residing in the UK.)	Alcohol moderation Alcohol use disorder	Web iOS Android	**Free**	• Two-minute risk assessment • Tips to decrease alcohol intake and goal setting • Drink tracking (calories/units) • Mindfulness videos • Seven-day summary reports • Adverse event monitoring • Endorsed by National Health Service • Online coaching sessions only available in UK
Headspace www.headspace.com Through guided meditation and mindfulness techniques, Headspace helps users reduce stress and maintain focus, and aids in sleep, anxiety, and more.	Stress management Sleep Anxiety Panic disorder	Web iOS Android	**Basic Version: Free** Headspace Starter Pack: Free (10 days) **Full Access Version:** • Monthly $12.99 • Annual $7.99/mo • Lifetime $399.99	• Sessions for children • Meditation packs for various health conditions • Minimeditations • Published in > 13 peer-reviewed journals and in > 65 research trials
Medisafe www.medisafeapp.com Medisafe is a personalized medication reminder and management app that helps users improve medication adherence. This app is good for patients with chronic and/or multiple medical conditions taking multiple medications.	Medication adherence and compliance	iOS Android	**Basic Version: Free** Medisafe **Upgraded Version:** Medisafe Premium • Monthly $4.99 • Annual $39.99	• Family/caregiver reminder system to assist with medication management • Provider access to real-time user data • Clinical opportunities to initiate proactive interventions • Several published research studies with positive outcomes
mySugr: Diabetes Tracker Log https://mysugr.com/ An integrated diabetes app designed to facilitate diabetes management, mySugr assimilates with multiple diabetes glucometers and CGMs to log, track, and analyze blood sugar levels. It also monitors food intake and activity levels.	Diabetes Diabetes management	Web iOS Android	**Basic Version: Free** mySugr-Free **Upgraded Versions:** **mySugr Pro** • Monthly $2.99 • Annual $27.99 **mySugr Bundle** (includes coaching, test strips, meter) $39.99/mo	• Pediatric-friendly "diabetes monster" • Estimates A1C from logged blood glucose values • CSV reporting abilities • Data syncs with Apple Health • Personal diabetes coaching with CDE (mySugr Bundle) • Available in 13 languages and 52 countries
Pacifica/Pacifica for Stress and Anxiety www.thinkpacifica.com Pacifica offers a variety of daily activities, tools, and exercises based on cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness principles to help users address and cope with anxiety, stress, and depression.	Anxiety Depression Stress	Web iOS Android	**Basic Version: Free** Pacifica (limited) **Upgraded Version:** **Pacifica Full Access** • Monthly $8.99 • Annual $53.99 • Lifetime $199.99	• Targets teens and adults • Online support community • Guided self-help paths and goals • Mood and health tracking • Clinician versions and pricing available • Endorsed by the ADAA

Abbreviations: ADAA, Anxiety and Depression Association of America; CDE, certified diabetes educator; CSV, comma-separated values [file type].

2 BUILD YOUR PERSONAL APP LIBRARY

Another strategy—touched upon in the "Manage" section earlier—is to create a personal library of highly regarded, well-vetted health apps to address common patient care matters. These could be recommended to a broad audience and will form the cornerstone of your digital compendium.

To get you started, Table 1 outlines a handful of health apps every primary care clinician should know about. These apps are supported by clinical research, endorsed or ranked by health care/industry expert organizations, and come recommended by clinical colleagues, students, or myself. The presented health apps are easily accessible via the App Store or Google Play and offer free versions, so you can assess and recommend them to your patients at no cost.

I hope you find these apps helpful with your future patient care efforts. **CR**

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