

Tracking your health



Apps can help monitor symptoms, physical activity and medical records, but choose carefully.

by Vicky Uhland

Want to eat right, get more exercise or reduce your stress? How about track your MS symptoms, manage your care or join a virtual support group?

There are 250,000 apps for that.

“But systemic reviews show that few of these health apps are evidence-based, use behavioral-change therapy or are tailored to the person using them,” says Amy Sullivan, PsyD, director of behavioral medicine, research and training at the Cleveland Clinic’s Mellen Center for Multiple Sclerosis Treatment and Research. Add to that the fact that the Food and Drug Administration currently doesn’t oversee or test health apps, and you’re basically on your own when it comes to deciding how effective or safe an app’s medical advice may be. Privacy can also be an issue, especially if an app asks for sensitive medical information. And, of course, just sifting through the thousands of offerings in your device’s app store can be exhausting and confusing.

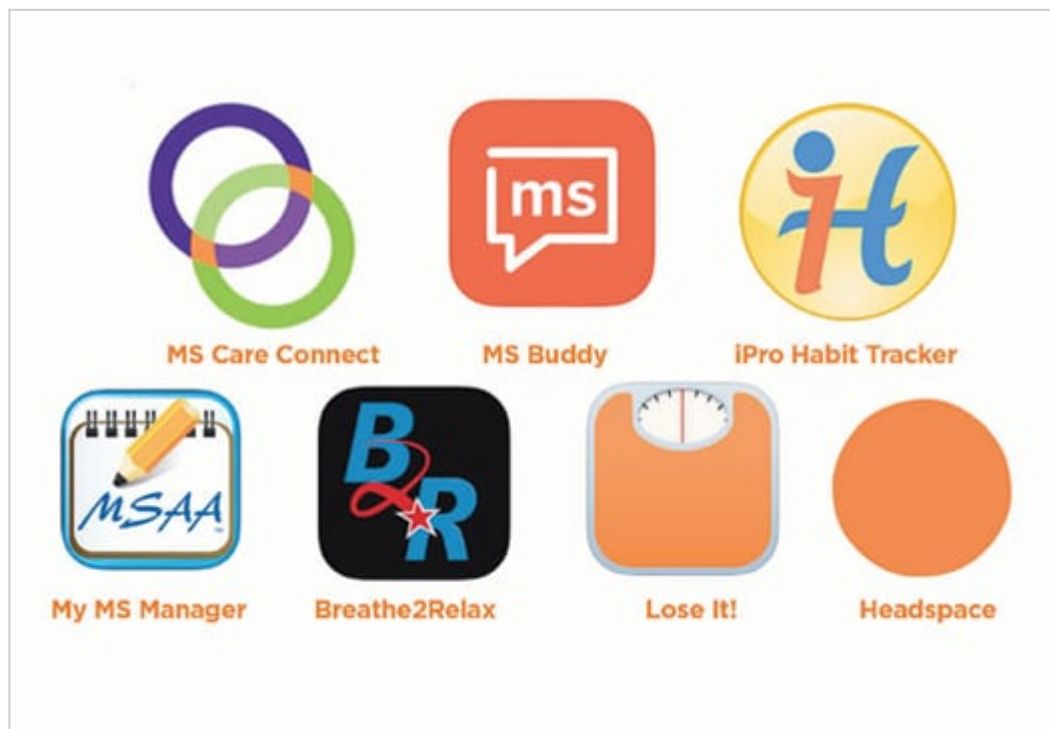
So does that mean you should just give up on health apps? Not at all, say Sullivan and Matthew Plow, PhD, assistant professor at Case Western Reserve University’s Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing. Apps that track your symptoms can be very helpful for both you and your doctors, Sullivan says. And Plow says apps that monitor your behavior can make you aware of what you’re currently doing regarding your health-and how to change it.

But how do you choose the right health apps? Sullivan and Plow offer the following tips.

Is the app effective?

There are several key questions to ask when evaluating whether a health app will actually deliver the results you're looking for:

- How reputable is the app developer? Check the app homepage in the app store for a link to the developer's website. Does the site look professional? Does it cite peer-reviewed, scientific information supporting the app?
- How popular is the app? Rankings and reviews can reveal an app's effectiveness.
- How is the app paid for? If the user buys the app, that's self-explanatory. But if it's free, you need to do some sleuthing. If the app has advertising, Sullivan cautions that it could be collecting your personal information. Plow points out that some apps are free to download but then offer in-app purchases, like a fee to remove ads. He also says some free apps are developed by pharmaceutical companies, so be aware of bias toward a certain drug.
- When was the app last updated? If it's been more than a year, Sullivan says that's a clue that the developers may not put much effort into the app.
- Does the app do what you want? Define your goals and see which apps meet them. Plow suggests starting with the free apps and then uninstalling them if they don't work for you.
- Does the app accommodate disabilities? Although they're rare, some apps allow you to use voice commands if you have trouble reading the screen or pushing buttons. Check user reviews to see if an app is difficult to operate.



Is the app safe?

Just as you would with any health advice, be wary when evaluating apps. In particular, ask

yourself the following questions:

- Will the app protect my privacy? There should be a privacy policy on the app homepage in the app store. Check to see if the developer will share your information with third parties, and if the app is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). “Basically, find out what information they’re asking for, why they need that information, and then decide if you’re comfortable sharing that,” Plow says.
- What does my medical provider think? Check with your doctors to see which apps they recommend. Sullivan’s and Plow’s favorites include:
 - [MS Care Connect](#). This free app offers research-supported surveys and tests that help you and your doctors monitor your symptoms and measure your physical and mental functioning.
 - [My MS Manager](#). This free app tracks disease activity and allows you to generate charts on things like your daily moods or pain level. The charts can be securely shared with your doctors.
 - [MS Buddy](#). This free app helps you connect with others with MS, either virtually or in person. “It’s like being in a support group, but you can do it on your own time,” Sullivan says.
 - [Breathe2Relax](#). This free app shows you how to use breathing exercises to fight stress, anxiety and insomnia.
 - [Headspace](#). This app is “probably the most widely used mental health app,” Sullivan says. It’s designed to teach meditation and mindfulness, and is free for the first 10 sessions.
 - [Lose It!](#) Plow included this free app in one of his studies. It helps you track your nutrition and physical activity, and allows you to share your goals with friends.
 - [iPro Habit Tracker](#). This app (99 cents in the Apple Store, free or \$1 versions in Google Play) helps you pay attention to helpful and harmful habits. “It can help you set self-management goals for reducing stress, fatigue and pain,” Plow says.

“While an app is not a substitute for a doctor, the more feedback you can get from an app that you’re feeling better or doing better, the more likely you’re going to keep doing what’s working for you,” Sullivan says.

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