

What doctors want patients to know about health wearables

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AT A GLANCE: Health wearables can help people track health trends and build healthier habits, but the data has limits. Here are the key things you will learn about health wearables from Aliasgar Z. Chittalia, MD, an internist and informaticist with Geisinger, and Jonathan Martin, MD, a psychiatrist with Baptist Health, in this article:

- Health wearables such as smartwatches, fitness trackers and smart rings can track heart rate, steps, activity, sleep and other measures, though some scores are estimates created by algorithms.
- Wearable devices can motivate people by showing progress and health trends in real time, but constant monitoring, alerts and daily goals may also cause anxiety or unhealthy fixation.
- Data from health wearables can help identify patterns worth discussing with a physician, but it should not be used on its own to diagnose a condition or make treatment decisions.
- Seek medical care if a wearable repeatedly signals abnormal readings and you experience symptoms such as chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness or fainting.
- Choose a wearable based on what you want it to help you do, focus on trends rather than a single reading and review how the device collects, shares and protects your health data.

The Apple Watch, Garmin fitness tracker, Samsung Galaxy Watch, Fitbit, Oura Ring and other health wearables are not just about simply counting steps. These consumer health wearables can track heart rate, sleep patterns, physical activity, blood oxygen levels and

other measures, giving people a steady stream of information about their health and daily habits.

For some people, that data can provide motivation to move more, improve sleep or notice changes worth discussing with a physician. But constant access to health measurements can also have a downside. Unexpected alerts, changing scores or a fixation on reaching daily targets may cause [anxiety](#), reinforce unhealthy behaviors or leave people worrying about numbers they do not fully understand.

As wearables collect more detailed information, patients and physicians are confronting larger questions: How reliable is the data? When is it useful in clinical care? And how can people use wearables without allowing the information to undermine their mental well-being?

A 2026 survey of more than 2,200 physicians in the U.S. and five other developed nations by the AMA and *Medscape* [shows that doctors are generally interested in wearables](#) and how the data they collect can be used to help manage patient care. Heart-related measurements, physical activity, alerts and sleep were among the information reviewed most often.

Physicians across the six countries largely agreed that wearable data can offer at least some clinical benefit. Yet routine integration remains limited. No more than 6% of physicians in any surveyed country said wearable data had been fully integrated into clinical workflows. Concerns about data accuracy, false-positive alerts, liability and added workload continue to shape how physicians use the information.

As these devices become more common, understanding what wearables can—and cannot—tell patients will be essential. So will knowing when the numbers provide useful context, when they may create unnecessary worry and how patients can share the information with their physician in a productive way.

The AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series gives physicians a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today's healthcare headlines.

In this installment, two physicians took the time to discuss what patients should know about wearables. They are:

- Aliasgar Z. Chittalia, MD, an internal medicine physician with Geisinger in Danville, Pennsylvania.
- [Jonathan Martin, MD](#), a psychiatrist and outpatient behavioral medical director at Baptist Health Corbin. He is also president of the Kentucky Psychiatric Medical Association.

[Baptist Health Medical Group](#) and [Geisinger](#) are part of the [AMA Health System Member Program](#), which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

Health wearables are technology we wear

“When we talk about wearable health devices, we are usually referring to technology that people wear on their body to track some aspect of their health or daily activity,” Dr. Chittalia explained. “That can include smartwatches, fitness trackers, smart rings or continuous glucose monitors.”

“While some elements, such as heart rate, are more direct measures,” he said, “others like [stress](#) scores, calories burned, or sleep quality are estimates created by algorithms.”

Wearables show change in real time

“When it makes a change in a patient’s life is when they’re seeing indicators or notifications of things that they’re doing that are actively having an effect in real time,” Dr. Martin said, noting that “people who thrive off of getting instant feedback or seeing progress in real time—such as exercise based on their heart rate or seeing an improved sleep score—pay off” with the use of wearables.

“People who are motivated by those things tend to actually make some life changes and respond to that,” he said. “For the most part, that’s what we see in the office.”

Health wearables track different measures

“In general, wearables are pretty good at tracking things like heart rate, steps and activity levels,” said Dr. Chittalia. Meanwhile, “some devices screen for irregular heart rhythms such as atrial fibrillation.”

However, “I recommend patients to be cautious with numbers like calories burned, stress scores, fitness age or detailed sleep staging,” he said. “Those can be interesting, but I would caution someone from making major health decisions based on one number from one day.

“The trend over time is usually much more useful than a single reading,” Dr. Chittalia added, emphasizing that “abnormal heart rhythm, such as atrial fibrillation, should be reported promptly to their doctor.”

You can build healthy habits with wearable devices

“This is where wearables can be very powerful. Sometimes just seeing your daily steps or activity level can make people more aware of their habits and motivate them to make small changes,” Dr. Chittalia said. “At the same time, balance is important. For some people, especially those who already worry a lot about their health, constant monitoring can create more anxiety.”

“I like patients to use the data as a nudge in the right direction, not as something that makes them feel pressured or worried all day,” he noted. “Even when patients know that the device is benefiting them, the majority of patients stop using them after a few months.”

Sometimes wearables can cause anxiety or over-reliance

“The downside is it does cause some anxiety or some over-reliance on the wearable,” Dr. Martin said, noting that he doesn’t “see that as much, but the times I do, it is people who

are more predisposed to an anxiety disorder or obsessional thoughts or perfectionism at baseline.”

“It is easy to go a negative direction when you have something that’s giving you real-time feedback or a score that you can improve,” he said. “It becomes a problem when it starts to impact your day-to-day life negatively.”

For example, “you may be obsessed with getting your sleep score better or getting your heart rate down during workouts and it may not necessarily be a bad thing unless day-to-day you’re overly worrying about it, you’re getting a bit illogical and you’re taking a lot of time out of your day to fixate or focus on these things when it’s not that important in the long run,” Dr. Martin said.

Be careful with certain health conditions

Anxiety can sometimes increase with different wearables if you have certain conditions, such as atrial fibrillation or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). For AFib, the worry comes from irregular or elevated heart rhythm. Then for COPD it has to do with oxygen level changes.

For example, “if you have AFib and your watch says you have an irregular rhythm, then all of a sudden you’re worried about this irregular rhythm, which will increase your heart rate because you’re worried and then that could throw you into an irregular rhythm or keep it going longer,” Dr. Martin said. “Then you’re just focused on it, and when you’re focused on it, it’s getting worse because you see it getting worse.”

“The same thing with [COPD](#). There are wearables that will track your oxygen levels—like a pulse oximeter—and if it goes down, you may worry about breathing troubles and the panic may lead to more breathing troubles,” he explained. “These two medical illnesses are things that I see wearables making the anxiety worse and giving you something to fixate on.”

Wearables aren’t as good as clinical evaluation

“It seems, for the most part, the information is decently reliable for wearables—it’s not just making things up and telling you something that’s completely inaccurate,” said Dr. Martin. “But it’s never going to be as good as a clinical evaluation or a diagnostic test.”

Augmented intelligence (AI), also known as artificial intelligence, “is a big thing right now and we should treat wearables in the same way as far as the efficacy and how reliant we should be on them,” he said. “We should use them as a tool. It can help with trends. We can look at patterns that we see, but we shouldn’t be using them as the end-all, be-all for health information.”

“We shouldn’t be using them to make a diagnosis or to drive treatment, just maybe to have extra input to give us an idea of where we should go or what’s going on at home,” Dr. Martin said. “I don’t know that any of the data is necessarily more reliable than others, but I do know the sleep monitoring is generally pretty good. It’s not quite as accurate as a sleep study, but they are good in measuring your different sleep cycles, your wakefulness and apneic periods during the night.”

“The heart rate tool is another one that’s reliable on Apple Watches or rings or whatever you might have,” he said, noting that “blood pressure is a little bit less reliable, depending on the wearable you’re using, but some are decent.”

Meanwhile, “the EKG functionality, I would look at it as a soft EKG—it’s never going to be as good, but it might tell you if there’s an irregularity or an arrhythmia or a pattern of arrhythmias that you see during the day,” Dr. Martin said, emphasizing that wearables are “more of a tool to use to give us more information as to which direction to go as opposed to something that we should rely on directly.”

Don’t panic when you get an alert from your wearable

“My first advice is, do not panic. These alerts can be helpful, but they are not perfect,” said Dr. Chittalia. “Sometimes a device can misread movement, skin contact, or other factors and generate an alert that may not reflect a true medical problem.”

Instead, “I ask patients to look at the whole picture. Are they having symptoms? Did the alert happen more than once?” he noted. “If the alert keeps happening, or if it comes with chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness, fainting or feeling very unwell, then they should seek medical care right away.”

“Wearables can point us toward a concern, but they do not replace a thorough medical evaluation,” Dr. Chittalia emphasized.

Data from wearables can signal a need to call your doctor

Whether it is an Apple Watch, an Oura Ring or another wearable, “it’s something that may show you patterns or something minor that’s happening throughout the day that you don’t necessarily see, or you might not see instant to instant when you’re at an appointment,” Dr. Martin said. “For example, ‘My heart rate gets really high anytime I’m walking,’ or ‘At night, it tends to spike. Is there something I should be worried about?’”

“General patterns and more information to go off of, but not necessarily something to hang our hats on and only use that,” he said, noting that data from wearables can be a starting point for identifying a problem early on.

“It is utmost important to understand that wearables are not medical care by themselves,” said Dr. Chittalia. “They can show trends, encourage healthier habits, and sometimes alert people to something worth checking, but they cannot replace a clinical evaluation, a physical exam or professional judgment.

Wearable data can connect to patient portals and the EHR

“In some healthcare systems, wearable information can connect to patient portals and can become part of the electronic health record with the right technology integration,” Dr. Chittalia said. “One important point I make to patients is that sending data into a portal does not always mean someone is watching it in real time.

“Patients should ask their care team how the information is used, whether it is reviewed, and when they should contact the office directly to report an abnormal reading or alert,” he added.

Take health wearable privacy seriously

“Privacy is something patients should take seriously with any wearable device,” Dr. Chittalia cautioned. “It’s worth asking: Who can see my data? Is it shared with third parties? Can I delete it? What happens if the company changes its policies or is purchased by another company?”

“Many people assume that anything related to health is protected in the same way as a medical record but may not always be true,” he said. “Taking a few minutes to understand the privacy policy can help patients make a more informed choice.”

When choosing a wearable, start with this question

“I usually tell patients to start with the question: What am I hoping this device will help me do?” Dr. Chittalia said. “If the goal is to walk more or stay active, a basic tracker may be enough. If someone has diabetes, a continuous glucose monitor may be much more meaningful.

“If a patient is having palpitations or concerns about rhythm, an EKG capable smartwatch may be worth discussing,” he added. But remember, “more features are not always better. The best device is the one that gives you information you can actually use.”

Be kind on yourself

“We have an ideal version of ourselves that we want to be or a milestone we want to hit and if we don’t hit that marker, it’s easy to get down on ourselves,” said Dr. Martin. “It’s really easy to beat ourselves up about it, to feel let down by not meeting this goal we think we should or that our watch tells us we should.”

Instead of being disappointed, “take a step back. Look at where you are, what’s happening and maybe set a more reasonable goal,” he said. “Set something that maybe is a little difficult for you or would be challenging that you would like to meet during the day, but don’t make it unobtainable.”

“A lot of times on the app or the device you’re using, there are standard goals for what your steps per day should be or what your exercise regimen should look like,” said Dr. Martin. “Reduce that a little bit or limit the notifications so you’re not getting so many during the day that’s telling you something that may make you judge yourself.”

“We can’t hold ourselves to a certain measure every single day, all day long. We’ve got to be kind to ourselves too,” he said. “If it’s a day that you’re not feeling it or not meeting those goals, be reasonable and do something that is going to make you feel good while still being productive.”

Use wearables in a reasonable way

When it comes to health wearables, whether it is an Apple Watch, Oura Ring or Garmin, it is important to be “reasonable about it. Too much of anything is usually a bad thing,” Dr. Martin said. “We want to take a middle ground with it. We want to use it reasonably but not be overly reliant on it.”

“Sometimes it is helpful to have some accountability during the day. That’s why they recommend workout partners because it’s easier to go to the gym when someone else is waiting on you to go to the gym with them,” he said. “But in wearables, they can be helpful for that reason, but you don’t want it to be something that you feel like you’re letting down or that you’re disappointing or that you’re constantly thinking about all day long.”

“If it becomes an issue to that point, then maybe we just need to back off of it all together and try other means,” Dr. Martin said. “But if we’re able to use it in a reasonable way by setting goals that are attainable, making steady progress towards those goals and use this as an informational tool to see where we are now versus where we started, that would be appropriate.”