

Technology: Smartphone apps to help keep you healthy

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Fans of the legendary sitcom “Seinfeld” will recall the episode in which Elaine enlists Kramer, in the guise of Dr. Van Nostrand, to steal her medical records so she can get a rash diagnosed.

The episode concludes with Elaine using a marker to replace the eyebrows that were singed off Uncle Leo’s face. And in between, Kramer takes some racy photos of George. But that isn’t important — Elaine’s medical records are what I want to focus on here.

Amid all of the absurdity, this episode did speak to a very real problem. Having to rely on a busy doctor’s office to forward your records to a hospital or specialist can lead to delays in examinations and treatment. If, like Elaine, you have a mysterious rash, that wait could be quite uncomfortable. But now, 15 years after Seinfeld shed light on the problem, there is a scratch for this particular itch, in the form of an iPhone App.

My Life Record allows you to load your charts, lab results, even X-ray images, right onto your phone. Download the app and request that your healthcare provider fax your records to a special fax number, which they are obliged to do, and your medical history is but a tap away. According to the app website, it costs \$59.99 per year or \$129.99 for lifetime access.

This is just one example of how phone apps are aspiring to do more than just waste your time. They also want to save your life. Or at least make it easier to maintain your health. One published figure puts the number of health-related mobile medical apps at more than 350,000.

Many of these apps simply take advantage of a smartphone’s handy database, calculation and calendar functions.

The **Diabetes Pilot** allows users to record glucose levels, medications, diet, weight and exercise workouts. Insulin requirements can be calculated based on glucose levels and nutritional intake, and reports are generated to track progress. It's available for \$29.99 on Windows Mobile and Palm devices, and \$11.99 for Apple handhelds.

There also are numerous apps for those trying to control their blood pressure. These allow users to track their medications, nutrition and exercise and generate reports to correlate these factors with blood pressure counts.

Recording and managing health-related information is all well and good, but it doesn't really fall into that category of amazing feats of technology. The real-time measurement and monitoring of body functions — that is where all the cool apps are at.

Folks concerned about their blood pressure no longer have to wait for their next doctor's appointment or a trip to the Wal-Mart pharmacy. In June, the FDA cleared the **Withings Blood Pressure Monitor** (available online at Walgreens for \$99.99), praising its non-invasiveness. The cuff connects to an iPhone, iPad or iTouch, where the results are recorded along with the date and time. Users are warned if the numbers fall into an unhealthy range, and the app offers an easy way to email the results to a physician.

Waiting on a baby? **Contraction Master** (\$1.99) allows pregnant women to easily track their contractions with a single tap. Then there is **My Baby's Beat** (\$3.99), which uses the phone's microphone to pick up a baby's heartbeat in utero and amplify it, as a stethoscope would, so expectant couples can hear that wondrous sound. It is worth noting that critics claim that such apps are unnecessary for a healthy pregnancy, or, in the case of the Contraction Master, can inhibit the natural progression of labor.

To keep track of the ol' ticker, there is the **iStethoscope Pro** app. For just 99 cents, you can press your iPhone's microphone to your chest (remove the phone's cover first), put in the earbuds and bop to the beat of your heart. A spectrogram of the audio can be emailed to your physician. Just remember, as the iStethoscope website points out, this is for entertainment purposes only.

The disclaimers and criticisms of these more adventurous health-care apps aren't unusual. Any technology that allows consumers to self-diagnose a condition has potential liability concerns. That is why the FDA is getting more involved with these technologies, much to the chagrin of some developers.

In July, the FDA released draft guidelines that would regulate mobile medical applications. The guidelines

cover those apps that allow smartphones to be used as medical devices, and those that provide diagnosis or treatment recommendations.

This would presumably include apps such as WebMD for iPhone and Android (free). A feature in this app allows users to enter symptoms to find maladies and ailments that match their condition. Potentially, a person facing a serious issue could dismiss it as something innocuous and put off seeking treatment. Thus, the FDA's concern.

The argument against regulating such apps is that similar services already are available online, including a symptom checker program on the WebMD website, that are not subject to approval.

While FDA involvement may slow development in this field, and there will certainly be more offerings that don't live up to their billing, look for exciting new things in health-care apps in the coming years.

Your smartphone can't replace the family doctor, but it can help you in maintaining your health between appointments.

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