

Digital tools can help put fitness goals on track

By Chris Swingle

Websites, health-related applications for Web-enabled cellphones and gadgets such as heart rate monitors may help some people toward goals to improve their health.

Of course, technology won't change your habits for you. Mike Krauklis, 29, of Penfield said phone apps to track workouts and what he ate were helpful when he was doing well, but he skipped them when he didn't see significant weight loss.

Dr. Betty Rabinowitz, medical director of the 22 primary care practices affiliated with University of Rochester Medical Center, said apps can provide patients with a shot of motivation and a way to get organized and track results. People who carry a Web-enabled cellphone may find it a convenient tool for recording blood pressure or blood sugar readings, medication or insulin use.

Rabinowitz, who used an app when she was getting back into a regular exercise habit, is in favor of tools that help people take responsibility for their own health. Still, she said, "It's no substitute for regular contact with a health care provider."

Elizabeth Lawley, director of the lab for social computing at Rochester Institute of Technology and an associate professor of interactive games and media, tried multiple digital health tools on her weight-loss journey.

Her Withings body scale has been the most valuable because it remembers her daily weight readings and she can view the trend on a graph — which smoothes daily fluctuations. Otherwise, a morning when she's up a pound even after a day of eating right and exercising could be dispiriting, she said.

"Visualization can be so powerful," said Lawley. She has lost 30 pounds in four months — which moved her from moderately overweight to the healthy range for her 4-foot-11-inch height.

She also likes an app called RunKeeper to track her workouts. On an outdoor run, the software uses her phone's GPS to track her route and report her distance and pace. It knows her current weight from her scale, so also reports her calories burned. When she finishes a workout on an elliptical machine, she enters the stats into her iPad, since she doesn't have her phone at hand.

Lawley, 48, also uses her iPad during her cardio exercise to watch TV shows via Netflix, a guilt-free treat that helps her work out longer, she said. Sharing her progress online with her social network has provided additional boosts: "My little Facebook cheering squad would give me the attagirls."

Digital tools also offer competitions and games that can be motivating. Lawley has used foursquare to post when she's at the gym, enough times to earn a digital "gym rat" badge.

Matt Lawrence, 29, of Brighton, says he wants to lose weight and tried a calorie-counting phone app for about a month but found it complicated to enter home-cooked meals and discouraging to see the calories add up.

"Sometimes you just don't want to know," he said. "The truth hurts."

Electronic tools can even get in the way of good intentions.

As Lawrence spoke, his phone chimed the arrival of a new message.

Glancing at the screen, Lawrence said, "A friend just IM'd me that there's fudge at my desk."

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