Fitness Trackers: Wearing Health & Wellness on Your Wrist

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Fitness trackers that record data such as heart rate, activity, calories, water and even sleep are an opportunity for employers to make it easier to engage employees in health & wellness programs. Just sync and go! Used in conjunction with a broad-based wellness strategy, fitness trackers can raise awareness of factors contributing to health issues:

- High resting heart rate, obesity or too little sleep
- Daily inactivity
- Daily food intake, including nutrition data

Sitting is the New Smoking:
Fitness Trackers Can Raise Awareness

In a world where people sit for extended periods on a daily basis, fitness trackers can raise awareness when idle and encourage activity. Why does activity matter? A Mayo Clinic¹ study compared adults who spent less than 2 hours a day in front of the TV or other screen-based entertainment with people who logged more than 4 hours a day of screen time. Those with more screen time had nearly a 50% increased risk of death from any cause.

Fitness trackers can prompt wearers to get up and move hourly and help them reach daily step and activity goals. Some users have turned to trackers for weight-loss support because of their ease of tracking physical activity as well as calories consumed and burned.

Additionally, the social aspect of fitness trackers allows users to connect with their co-workers, friends and family for a source of support and encouragement. Trackers also encourage friendly competition to out-step and out-perform others within a social network.

An example is the 2016 survey by HealthMine² which found that 46% of people who use fitness trackers say the data collected is not incorporated into their healthcare.

It’s important to recognize that fitness trackers are not a standalone solution. They are one tool of a holistic health & wellness strategy. And, like any tool, participants require education in order to realize significant rewards. Therefore, an employer-provided education process should include 7 elements:
1. A wellness platform (through the health insurance carrier or a third-party vendor) that can track, collect and aggregate fitness tracker data

2. Information on how fitness tracker data can positively impact the participant's ability to maintain their current level of health or manage health risks that may already exist (the WIIFM, or what's in it for me)

3. Assuring participants that their personal health data is protected under HIPAA and is only reported to the employer on an aggregate level (not individually)

4. Rewards, incentives and recognition delivered annually and throughout the year (another WIIFM)

5. Access to trackers through raffle drawings or offering a partial discount or reimbursement to participants who successfully complete the wellness program

6. Some carriers provide wellness dollars that can offset the cost of qualified wellness-related expenses, including fitness trackers

7. The ability for people who don't use fitness trackers to participate in the health & wellness program anyway

Prevent and Manage Health Risks with Fitness Trackers

The HealthMine survey I mentioned earlier also found that 44% of consumers enrolled in health & wellness programs reported having a diagnosed chronic condition, such as high cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc. However, just 14% of respondents said that their wellness program helped them to better manage their health issues.

Well, that's one opinion. In my experience, fitness trackers help participants manage chronic conditions and stay healthy. According to a study by the University of Michigan Health Management Research Center, an organization saved $350 per employee when a low-risk participant remained low risk and $153 per employee when a high-risk participant's health risks were reduced. This is an often-overlooked benefit of wellness: keeping healthy employees healthy.

A percentage of participants with chronic health risks will need to engage with a physician and perhaps take prescription medications to manage their conditions. Others will find it possible to manage health risks by embracing a healthy lifestyle, including diet, activity, stress management, etc. That goes for already healthy participants. Regardless of how participants manage health risks, the key takeaway is that they do manage health risks. An increased focus on health and personal responsibility directly impacts an employer's year-over-year healthcare costs.

Beyond ensuring that participants complete their annual physical, biometric screenings and health risk assessment, fitness trackers can provide a daily reminder to get active, stay healthy and be well. Remember, a fitness tracker shouldn’t comprise the whole health & wellness approach, but it can be a key element to a successful wellness program.
1 Mayo Clinic, "What are the Risks of Sitting Too Much?"
2 health-careinformatics.com, "Survey: Nearly Half of Consumers Report Data from Digital Health Tools Not Incorporated into their Healthcare"
3 University of Michigan Record Update, "Study: Workplace Wellness Plan Saves Money Over Long Term"

For more information, please call 1.877.426.7779