

mHealth Apps:



Guidance and Tips at Your Fingertips

by Deborah Sternberg
Executive Vice President at AlwaysCare Benefits, Inc.
Baton Rouge, LA
Deborah@AlwaysCareBenefits.com

One of the things that your clients appreciate about you is your accessibility. They are able to reach you when they need you via phone, email or maybe even social media. And because you probably spend most of your day away from a desk, you may be most accessible via your smartphone. Yes, that phone, the one with a computer operating system, Internet capabilities and a lot of apps.

The same mobile tools and wireless devices that make you so accessible—and the world so accessible to you—are also being used to improve health outcomes, healthcare services and health research. It's called mHealth, short for mobile health, and it's on track to have a significant impact on the healthcare industry.

mHealth Apps

As of today, there are more than 700,000 apps for smartphones and tablets available via the Apple App Store, close to that number on Google Play and more than 120,000 Microsoft apps. Of those, an estimated 23,000 are mHealth apps designed to assist with a variety of health-related matters, including exercise regimens, pregnancy tracking, medication reminders and dieting. One in five smartphone owners have downloaded an app to track or manage health.¹ According to Juniper Research, the number of healthcare and medical app downloads were estimated to reach 44 million by the end of 2012.² Medical and healthcare apps are the third-fastest-growing app category for both iPhones and Android phones.

mHealth apps typically fall into one of two categories: medical or health/wellness. Because many of these apps are developed to encourage changes in behavior, your clients could potentially investigate the options and incorporate apps into their wellness programs. Although many apps are free, some of the more complex ones come at a cost. Your clients may

consider covering the costs associated with employee downloads as an extra step to show their interest in employee health and well-being. It may be easier for your clients to navigate through the mHealth app options by evaluating apps from health, pharmacy and medical product brands with which they are familiar.

Here are just a few standouts from 2012 to provide you with a brief overview of the mHealth landscape:

Preparing for an upcoming race? If your client has a number of employees who are beginner-level runners or are preparing for an upcoming 5K race, Couch-to-5K promises to have them ready in nine weeks. Couch-to-5K features virtual coaches, access to your playlist and motivational mantras while tracking progress and workouts.

Can't remember to take meds? If your client has a number of employees who are having a hard time sticking to their medication regimens, MedCoach can assist them by providing reminders. It tracks usage and can connect directly to a pharmacy for refills.

Want to make healthier selections at the grocery store? If your client has a number of employees who are undertaking a weight-loss challenge, Fooducate can assist by providing details on grocery items that are scanned using the app and offering healthier alternatives. With the largest database of UPCs (product bar codes), Fooducate recommends minimally processed, real foods that are naturally rich in nutrients and antioxidants.³

Need to unwind? If your client has employees looking for stress relief techniques, Simply Being—Guided Meditation can assist with a voice-guided, five- to 20-minute meditation session. Users have the option of listening with music, without music or with nature sounds.

Want a virtual personal trainer? If employees are interested in beginning or enhancing their workout routines, Nike Training Club can assist by providing detailed instructions and audio guidance on 114 workouts. It helps with strength, cardio, interval and core training. Workout options are presented based on the user's goals and fitness level. Apps like this one may also have a social component that adds another layer of motivation, as friends and colleagues can compete and cheer each other on.

Ready to quit smoking? If your client has a smoking-cessation program in place or is looking to start one, there are a number of apps dedicated to assisting people in their efforts to quit smoking. Apps in the marketplace can measure a variety of things, including the impact that

cessation has on their health and finances, the number of cigarettes they haven't smoked since quitting and even an estimate of life extension, while enabling them to document the challenges they face during the process.

To see positive long-term health results, app usage requires a level of commitment from people beyond the initial step of downloading the app. To encourage routine usage, many apps have been designed with features to grab and maintain interest, such as rewards for achieved goals, alerts, alarms and even emails. These features make using apps more fun and engaging.

Some apps are required to be regulated as medical devices because of their capabilities; however, it is important to remind clients that apps do not replace care and advice from doctors. The Food and Drug Administration is working to develop stricter guidelines to ensure consumer safety and to stay on top of this rapidly expanding market. Currently, if an app is used to diagnose a condition or replace the role of a doctor, the FDA will review the app prior to its release to the marketplace.

In addition to health regulation, the Federal Trade Commission has published recommendations for privacy and data security. Several apps have been removed from the market because of false and misleading medical claims. As you make recommendations to your clients, it is also important that you are recommending trusted apps from reliable sources.

Like other wellness initiatives, the ultimate goal is to change behaviors for a healthier lifestyle. mHealth apps are having a significant impact on how individuals address their own health and well-being. It is likely that your clients are looking for additional tactics to reinforce the importance of employee health and overall wellness. With you as their valued and trusted partner, your clients expect you to keep them in the know. The insights you provide will enhance their communications with their employees, so take advantage of every opportunity to strengthen those relationships.

Although your clients may already have a few mHealth apps on their phones, they may not have considered incorporating them into their official workplace wellness efforts or internal communications. By making mHealth app recommendations based upon what you know about your clients' internal efforts and what you learn from valued sources outside your agency, you will exhibit your commitment to their business as well as strengthen your role as their trusted health benefit advisor. **HIU**

1 Fox, Susannah and Maeve Duggan. Mobile Health 2012. Pew Internet & American Life Project, November 8, 2012

2 <http://www.juniperresearch.com/viewpressrelease.php?id=352&pr=275>. Accessed December 20, 2012

3 <http://www.fooducate.com/>. Accessed December 27, 2012