

# The Pros and Cons of Getting ‘App-y’

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We live in an era where we can order groceries online and have them delivered right to our kitchen. We are able to do nearly all banking online, making it possible to never set foot in a brick-and-mortar bank branch. It can be frustrating, then, to find that due to healthcare’s slow regulatory processes it’s not as easy or quick to receive care as it is to buy food or do banking.

These days, savvy patients are accessing their healthcare information on their computers at home and even on the go with their smartphones. And patients increasingly want to interact with providers this way too, demanding telehealth options for an array of services, such as the ability to schedule appointments electronically, access their patient portal on their phones, and securely send their physicians data from their own health and wellness trackers.

The problem is some mobile capabilities are advancing faster than the regulatory bodies that govern those technologies, which means to a large extent many providers can’t use all the data their patients bring them. Both patients and providers are frustrated by this. However, it would be beneficial if both patients and providers understood the current limitations of existing health IT capabilities.

## What Patients Want

Healthcare is trying to adopt the technology as it becomes available, but adoption still lags in comparison to other fields. In other industries, such as retail, technology allows for a very interactive experience. But given the legal protections around protected health information (PHI), only individuals with the proper HIPAA training should handle patient data. Patients understand that face-to-face encounters aren’t replaceable, they just want the convenience factor that other online activities offer. While healthcare is lagging in the area of connectivity and technology, circumstances are improving. Some urgent care centers and physician offices offer easy online sign-in options where patients can enter in some of their own medical history, which saves time when they arrive for the visit. Another option for individuals seeking mental health services are mobile apps such as TalkSpace that provide individual counseling and relationship counseling online.

Several trustworthy apps are available that can interface with the provider’s electronic health record (EHR) or patient portal, which allows for more real-time patient updates (i.e., blood sugar and blood pressure monitoring). Once a physician has signaled their preference for such an app, patients might begin to feel a more harmonious relationship with their provider. This relationship can lead to happier patients and increased compliance with the treatment plan set forth by their provider.

## What Providers Want

Healthcare providers that are open to accepting patient-generated data are taking a much needed step in terms of patient engagement. Providers can also measure their levels of patient engagement by documenting interactions on patient portals, which is also a key element of value-based care. The more points of contact the patient has with their healthcare provider, the more likely they are to be compliant with specific instructions, such as taking medications or following a special diet. Once a physician has connected with a patient through their portal—even if it’s a smartphone app connected to the portal—the physician can push out educational materials and helpful tips to the patients, thereby increasing patient engagement.

It would be wise of providers to try and not feel threatened by patients who play an active role in their care. Instead, the provider has a tremendous opportunity to engage with and educate their patients. To the best of their ability, providers need to embrace the “app-y” world by becoming familiar with and knowledgeable about apps currently available to their patients. Providers can leverage these apps alongside their patients to help promote a healthier lifestyle.

Difficulties can arise, however, when patients or providers choose poorly designed and formatted apps. Poor design and security configurations can expose PHI to the wrong hands, or allow the input of inaccurate and thus unsafe information. For

example, a study published by the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* found that apps designed for dementia patients were lacking privacy safeguards. Reviewing 125 iPhone apps that matched the search terms of “medical + dementia” or “health & fitness + dementia,” only 33 of the apps had privacy policies. Compounding the issue is that dementia patients are a particularly vulnerable patient population, the study authors noted.

Despite the risks, healthcare needs to embrace new technology when it comes to apps as patients are ready and willing to embrace this new interaction. The question is: Are providers also ready and willing to embrace this new type of interaction? Apps have the potential to be very beneficial if built and used in the proper fashion. To take this leap healthcare will need to make some changes, but if everyone (providers, organizations, vendors, etc.) works together this is change that may be possible.

## Reference

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