

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP SENIORS LIVE BETTER

Tools to track their health, keep them safe, organize their lives and stay connected and engaged with family and friends are just a few clicks away. Here are some apps and tech services your parents should know about.

BY KRISTEN J. GOUGH

“Mom, I’ve got a 10-day streak going with grandma,” my 15-year-old boasted as I nodded my head trying to recall exactly how a Snapchat streak works. I had every intention of diligently following my teen’s posts via my own account, but I found I simply didn’t have the patience. Not so with Grandma! After my teen explained how it worked, Grandma G downloaded the app and became a bit of a Snapchat guru – and my teen relished their conversations, er, streaks.

Once thought of as technophobes, seniors are now beginning to embrace technology for many of the same reasons other demographics are – to stay connected with others and to make their lives a little easier. Today more and more seniors are active participants in the digital age: around 42 percent of adults ages 65 and older now own smartphones compared to 18 percent in 2013, according to the Pew Research Center. Equally telling, 67 percent of seniors are now

internet users, which the report notes is a “55-percent-point increase in just under two decades.”

And yet seniors have other reasons they’re tapping into tech – for some, it makes it possible for them to stay in their homes longer, while helping loved ones keep track of their well-being. In a recent survey from The Home Depot, the majority of respondents – 90 percent – believed that “smart home devices make it easier for seniors to live independently, allowing them to remain in their homes for years to come.”

So what kind of tech should seniors consider (besides downloading Snapchat to keep up with the grandkids)? Here are a few guidelines and suggestions to get started.

MONITORING EVERYDAY HEALTH

Before you begin searching the app store for the latest and greatest,

remember that your smartphones already come equipped with built-in health apps. “There’s a lot of health information that smartphones are already tracking,” explains Sanket Shah, an instructor for the University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Biomedical and Health Information Systems. “It’s often kind of forgotten, but with just a few clicks you have a health monitoring device that can tell you how many steps you’re taking, your heart rate.” He also points out Apple’s Bedtime program tucked right into the clock that helps with reviewing sleep patterns.

Calorie- and exercise-tracking apps, like MyFitnessPal, have easy interfaces for watching what you eat and helping you stick to fitness goals. Many include a scanner, too, so you can simply use the food’s barcode to import calorie information.

Particularly for seniors, wearables and devices that work with smartphones are making it easier to track specific health ▶



concerns. “One that really stuck out to me is KardiaMobile, which takes technology that already exists and puts it right into people’s hands to offer on-site EKG readings,” notes Shah. The person places their fingers on the credit card-sized device and then the EKG readings pop up right on the smartphone screen. You can email the results to yourself or your doctor. The \$99 device is FDA cleared and can even clip right onto your phone.

TRACKING YOUR MEDICATION USE

Some seniors have several medications they’re taking on a regular basis. Making sure you’re taking all of your medications on the right day can become challenging. Shah points out that skipping medications can have serious implications for seniors. To remember when to take medications, and which ones, he suggests the Medisafe app. Within the

app, you’re able to set reminders of when to take medications, along with other features like drug interaction warnings and even family scheduling, where you can list out a caregiver who will also be informed if you miss taking your medication.

Beyond apps, there are a variety of different medication reminder devices available on the market, such as automatic pill dispensers (some that can connect into smartphone apps), medicine caps with alarms and even pillboxes equipped with alarms.

HOUSING ALL YOUR MEDICAL RECORDS – AND MORE

Take advantage of the apps that are connected with health services you already use. For example, your health insurance provider most likely has a digital system, and perhaps even an app, that makes it possible for you to schedule

doctor’s appointments, contact your physician, see your medical records, and access other health information. Shawn Bennis, a registered nurse and C.A.R.E. Program Coordinator for Henry Ford Health System, notes that seniors may want to consider letting caregivers, or their adult children, have proxy access. “At Henry Ford we have MyChart and the person can grant ‘proxy’ access through the system. You’re able to grant full or restricted access.” Again, this isn’t a new offering, but something that’s already available that you may not be using.

Your health insurer is also likely to offer desktop and mobile access to your account. Even if you don’t access all of the information related to your health insurance digitally – Shah offers a quick tip: See if you have a mobile insurance card through your insurer. So instead of having to worry about carrying your health insurance card, you can access it from your smartphone. ▶

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CHECK IN WITH A VIRTUAL PHYSICIAN

Telehealth services are becoming more widely available, making it possible for patients of all ages to interact with healthcare providers remotely. Telehealth applications come in many different forms, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, but can be broken out into four general categories – including live (synchronous) videoconferencing with a healthcare provider; store-and-forward (asynchronous) videoconferencing where you send health information electronically to a healthcare provider for review at another time; remote patient monitoring (RPM), in which your medical data is transmitted from the individual’s electronic device to the physician for review; and mobile health (mHealth) where healthcare providers send general health information texts to your mobile device.

You might call or look online to see what type of telemedicine your healthcare provider offers. For example, Teledoc touts a median response time of 10 minutes – meaning the time you take clicking a few buttons within the app to describe your symptoms to the physician calling you takes far less time than driving to a doctor’s office. Keep in mind, however, the service is more applicable for general medical concerns, like colds, allergies and respiratory infections, not chronic disease treatments.

HELPING IN EMERGENCIES

Falls are a serious concern for seniors. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that “every 20 minutes an older adult dies from a fall in the United States. Many more are injured.” Tech companies have taken notice of this and offer various solutions, like wearable devices such as the Lively Mobile Medical Alert (device costs and monthly plan fees apply) and MyNotifi (one-time fee and no ongoing costs for use), both of which include fall detection technology to automatically alert family or friends if a fall is detected.

STAYING CONNECTED

Smart devices such as Amazon’s Echo and Google Home are making it simpler to do everything from playing music to ordering groceries and much more. These virtual assistants can handle multiple tasks via voice commands.

Other devices are taking face-to-face interactions to a whole new level. If you’re ready to go beyond video chat through your smartphone, Facebook’s Portal includes a smart camera that follows you as you move around the room (or the person on the other end, if they also have a Portal device, too). Portal can also handle multiple calls at once. Other family members don’t need to have the device to participate in the call.

Beyond these devices, tech companies are pushing towards devices that interact

with seniors using artificial intelligence and robotics. Dubbed an “active aging companion,” ElliQ aims to help seniors stay active, both physically and mentally. The artificial intelligence device talks to you, making suggestions, like having you look at pictures, chat with friends, go out for a walk or listen to a podcast (the device will be available for pre-order in a few weeks). Other devices and services are designed more specifically to help seniors stay in their homes longer, with various levels of monitoring. For example, some monitoring services involve outfitting a home with devices that can detect when the fridge is opened and closed, to ensure seniors are eating regularly; when doors open and shut, to check that seniors aren’t staying indoors for a prolonged amount of time – all this information can be made available to caregivers to ensure seniors are doing OK.

And it’s likely the devices for seniors will continue to become more advanced to allow seniors to stay in their home longer, through digital devices, while being able to stay better connected with their friends and love ones. “More and more organizations are really taking an innovative approach to developing products for seniors,” Shah says.

Engaging on social media platforms is another great way for seniors to stay connected to family – just like my mom did with my daughter. But it’s not something that all seniors feel comfortable with or understand how to use.

“I recommend that seniors take advantage of their public library and online tutorials. Sometimes all it takes is a quick tutorial, which often we do not get when we first use a comprehensive application,” Shah says. “Most libraries will have some sort of course or gathering where the focus is going to be on social media (using Facebook or Snapchat).” ●

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