



YOUR HEALTH

Is it time to stop using your fitness tracker?

The devices monitor your sleep, your recovery and your workout intensity. Some experts warn the gadgets could be hindering, not helping, your fitness.

Hilary Achauer *Washington Post*

In 2017, LC LeClair's health insurance provider offered her a free fitness tracker as part of her wellness benefits.

LeClair, then 46, had always been active. Though she'd experienced some medical challenges that had limited her ability to exercise, her health had stabilized and she was swimming twice a week at her local YMCA, doing yoga two or three times a week and walking regularly.

When her insurance company offered her the tracker, LeClair, who lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, and trains Montessori teachers, thought it would help her stay motivated. And, at first, she liked tracking her steps and monitoring her heart rate. The information was new and interesting.

After a few months, however, the tracker became a standard against which she measured herself. She began focusing not on the pleasure of walking, but on how to make sure she would get enough steps. Instead of noticing the changing sky or trees, she worried her heart rate wasn't high enough. When she woke up, her first thought was, "Will I get enough steps today?"

"I tried to pretend it wasn't there and let it do its data tracking without thinking about it," LeClair said, but that was becoming more difficult. She found herself wishing she could go for a walk without the device pinging her to tell her about her progress.

And then one day LeClair decided she'd had enough. "I took it off and I threw it in my bathroom wastebasket," she said. Years after throwing away her fitness tracker, LeClair's activity level hasn't declined.

"I tortured myself for eight months because I thought it was what we were supposed to do or it was so good to have all the data tracking," she said.

Today's fitness trackers can do so much more than just track your steps. The latest wearable devices monitor your sleep, your recovery, your workout intensity, even keep track of your waves while surfing. Access to this information is not always positive, and some experts warn the gadgets could be hindering, not helping, your fitness.

Here's how to know if it's time to ditch your tracker and what to do afterward.



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POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH TRACKERS

Alissa Rumsey, a registered dietitian in Brooklyn and author of the book "Unapologetic Eating," coaches individuals and groups on intuitive eating and exercise. She said fitness trackers help some of her clients get an idea where they are with their movement, but for many people tracking can become a negative obsession.

"They become fixated on the numbers and kind of preoccupied with tracking and hitting certain numbers and in doing so lose track of what really matters," Rumsey said.

Fitness trackers can start to become unhealthy if there are no boundaries attached to their use, warns Daryl Appleton, a psychotherapist and performance coach in East Greenwich, Rhode Island.

"If you are constantly checking your app or steps and measuring your worth by it, or have found that tracking your fitness and caloric intake is impeding your everyday personal and professional life, you could be priming yourself for certain mental health disorders," Appleton said.

In addition to making people obsessed with keeping their numbers where they think they should be, fitness trackers can discourage exercising at all. Steph Gaudreau, a nutritional therapy practitioner and strength coach in San Diego, said one of her clients purchased a tracker to help her feel motivated to walk regularly. Instead, it had the opposite effect.

The woman told Gaudreau if she knew she wasn't going to get in 10,000 steps then she wouldn't walk at all.

Another potential problem with fitness trackers is that they can encourage users to ignore their bodies' cues and keep exercising when they shouldn't.

"They stop paying attention to how their body feels and if they need rest, if they need movement," Rumsey said. "It's more like, 'Oh, I hit my step goals. So I don't have to worry about moving today,' or, 'I didn't hit them, and even if I feel really tired and run-down, I need to get out there and hit my step goals or my calorie goals.'"

This can lead people to feel disconnected from their bodies.

Fitness trackers remove the boundaries that used to exist between medical devices and consumer products. Information that was formerly confined to doctor's offices — such as heart rate variability and sleep patterns — are now lifestyle products. The benefit of these blurred lines is that we have more information at hand about our own health; the drawback is that we're left to our own devices to interpret and analyze the information we collect.

Leela Magavi, a psychiatrist and regional medical director for Mindpath Health, said that although trackers can be useful tools that help people create routines and build positive habits, they are not tested or regulated as devices that make accurate clinical diagnoses, and as Rumsey discovered, they may even have inaccurate results.

"Trackers do not know an individual's life story and are unable to assess physical or mental wellness," said Magavi, who lives in Newport Beach, California. She warned that they can generalize recommendations that could lead to overexertion for an individual, resulting in injuries.

HEALTHY KIDS

Ski program aids Indigenous and underserved youth

Andrea Tamboer *Advance Local*

For Nordic ski instructor Elizabeth Major, liberating kids from phones and technology and helping them appreciate the outdoors is a dream come true.

Major has helped launch an innovative cross-country ski program that gets Native American youth and other diverse and underserved elementary students out on the trails at Crystal Mountain Resort & Spa in Thompsonville.

"Cross-country skiing is good for their physical and mental health," she said. "It's a healing thing to get out in the woods."

The resort's Crystal Community Ski Club has partnered with the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians and northwest Michigan elementary, middle and high schools to first bring the sport to the schools and then bring the kids to the resort's 25 kilometers of groomed trails. And thanks to national funding from Share Winter Foundation and the Professional Ski Instructors of America, CCSC programs, such as Nordic Rocks and LRBOI Learn to Ski, are free. More than 600 youth have participated in Nordic Rocks, now in its fourth season.

"Winter can't be a sticking point in Michigan," said Sammie Lukaskiewicz, vice president of marketing and communications at Crystal Mountain. "Our goal is to get more

young people sliding on the snow. For many of these kids, it's their only exercise. We want to remove all barriers. And Nordic skiing is a lot easier entry point than (downhill) skiing."

It's part of a larger program under CCSC that gives youth access to the sport as well as downhill skiing and snowboarding. Funding helps provide equipment, transportation, coaching and liability insurance, among other things.

For the cross-country ski portion, students practice three times a week. They first learn technique and gradually get out on the resort's trail system, which includes beginner, intermediate and difficult trails.

A former opera singer, voice professor and triathlete, Major and her husband, Tim, a veteran skier, became certified instructors and took cues from a similar program in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada. Share Winter also supports similar programs in Oregon, New Jersey, New York, Minneapolis, Montana and Colorado.

Nationally, some resorts, including Aspen Snowmass and Powdr, have committed to increasing diversity and inclusion at their resorts. Powdr, for example, has community initiatives in its "Play Scholarship" campaign that include awarding scholarships to help people attend their camps and a partnership with STOKED, a nonprofit that



Ski instructor Elizabeth Major helps fit a youngster from the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians with cross-country skis before hitting the trails at Crystal Mountain Resort & Spa in Thompsonville. *Crystal Mountain Resort photo*

mentors youth from underserved communities who are interested in board sports.

"Most kids didn't realize it's more than just walking on skis," Major said of Crystal's Nordic program. "They learn they can go fast, they learn skate skiing. We're creating a culture of Nordic skiing. Nobody says 'I don't like this.' They fall in love with a sport they didn't know existed."

Overcoming the stigma with students that cross-country skiing is somehow not as cool as downhill skiing and snowboarding hasn't been an issue, Major said.

"These kids think this is cool. There's a buzz about it," she said. "I tell them 'you're

coming home to yourself in nature. And then we're going on an adventure.'"

It also doesn't hurt that some well-known high school athletes in the region have taken up the sport. Some of them, cross-country runners especially, do it in the off-season to remain competitive.

For other ski areas nationwide that might be looking to establish similar programs, Major has created a full curriculum.

"We built this program from the ground up," she said. "We are more than happy to share it."

Associated Press contributed to this report.