



Say  
ahhh...larming.

one in 10 Americans often use symptom-checker apps instead of seeing a doctor. Even savvy consumers can be sucked in, since some apps distort credible science to make their claims ring true. The scary reality: Trusting your health to an app could leave you in worse shape than before you downloaded it.

In 2011, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) called foul on two apps that purported to “cure” acne using light—one of which cited a study about light-based acne treatments to bolster its claims. “There are medical devices that transmit light to treat acne, but a smartphone screen doesn’t have this capacity,” says Kvedar, who is a dermatologist.

Those two apps are history, but a quick browse through the App Store shows more potential snake oil for sale. Like the acne offenders, one app says it uses light emitted by the phone to treat seasonal affective disorder, a type of depression related to lack of sunlight. Another app claims to use sound from your phone to relieve headaches, toothaches, and muscle aches—also dubious claims.

“The idea that the phone has specialized sound and vibration capacity that can be harnessed by holding it up to the painful area is a stretch,” says David Copenhaver, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of anesthesiology and pain medicine at the University of California Davis Health System. Scores of less gimmicky apps offer information on common conditions, like cancer and diabetes, but aren’t

necessarily created by physicians or based on research. Some bogus health apps are little more than a waste of time and money, but others could put you at real risk. “We’re concerned that consumers may delay seeking out medical advice

# AppHazard

A slew of smartphone apps promises better health at the touch of a button. Careful—relying on them may be a very bad call. *By Jennifer Abbasi*

“Having a little computer in the palm of your hand that’s connected to a network that’s always on is incredibly powerful for your health,” says Joseph C. Kvedar, M.D., director of the Center for Connected Health. Trouble is, with more than 40,000 mobile health apps reported to be on the market, a lot of

people out there are trying to abuse that power.

Apps can help you track your period, check cold symptoms, or find an M.D., but the recent surge in their numbers brings a new concern: “quack” apps that promise to heal what ails you. A 2012 exposé by the New England Center for Investigative Reporting found that more than 20 percent of the 1,500 health apps examined claimed to treat or cure a medical condition. What’s worrying is that they don’t always live up to those claims.

“Few of the health apps available today are research-based,” says Kvedar. Yet consumers are turning to this co-pay-free advice in droves: Last year, an estimated 247 million people downloaded at least one mobile health app, and a recent Pew Research Center report found that more than half of smartphone owners have turned to their devices with medical questions. Another survey found almost

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A quick fix can cause a lasting problem.

based on a claim that gives them a false sense of security,” says Mary Johnson, an attorney at the FTC. For example, 75 percent of phone apps that claimed to spot skin-cancer lesions missed almost a third of melanomas, reports a new study published in *JAMA Dermatology*.

Sham health apps may begin to diminish as regulators like the FTC and the Food and Drug Administration increase their scrutiny on the industry. In the meantime, there are plenty of digital gems that can help you stay healthy; you just have to know how to pick 'em and when they shouldn't sub in for a trip to your doctor.

**> Be a cyber skeptic.** Beware of apps that promise fantastic or quick-and-easy results. “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is,” says Naomi Miller, a medical librarian at the National Library of Medicine.

**> Trust your source.** Apps from well-known health organizations are the most likely to have solid medical underpinnings. You can also choose from more than 20

free apps from government agencies at [apps.usa.gov](http://apps.usa.gov). (One caveat: There's no way to tell if the content of even reliable apps reflects the latest info—the dates on app updates may refer only to software fixes.) Be wary of apps that “have a sparse description and don't really exist anywhere else on the Web,” says Brian Dolan, managing editor and cofounder of MobiHealth News. “If it's a real company,

it's likely to have some press coverage and a substantial website.”

**> Put it to your peers.** Online patient communities may be the best source for finding useful apps and weeding out duds, says Dolan. And don't forget to read the user comments on an app's page in the online store; if there are only a few reviews and they are glowing, the developers probably posted them.

**> Check out Happtique.** This website, which is owned by the Greater New York Hospital Association, is developing a certification program for health apps that get the seal of approval from health professionals. To be certified, the apps must also protect your privacy—a growing concern with apps that can track, collect, and sell your data.

**> Ask your doctor.** Health-care providers are beginning to embrace the consumer health-app revolution, says Dolan. Even with your physician's blessing, be wary of claims that imply you can use the app in lieu of an office visit. Even the best apps today can only inform you, not treat you. ■

## The Best Wellness Apps

- **First Aid by the American Red Cross** Recommended by physician-run iMedicalApps.com as one of the most innovative apps of 2012 for its video and step-by-step tutorials, this app is a leader in using games to help patients learn.
- **iTriage** This well-designed symptom checker, which boasts frequently updated

physician-written and Harvard-reviewed content, also helps you find a doctor and lets you see the waiting times at local ERs.

- **HealthTap** Get quick on-screen answers to general health questions, written by physician specialists around the country.
- **UMSkinCheck** This app, developed by the University of Michigan, gets a thumbs-up from dermatologists for its self-exam walk-through and full-body photography, so you can track changes in moles over time.



## THE DOCTOR IS IN

**I sweat way more during gym classes than anyone else. What's going on?**

—Danielle, Hasbrouck Heights, NJ

How much we sweat depends in part on the number of sweat glands we were born with. But other factors play a role. The woman next to you could be wearing gear that helps her stay cool, or she could have slurped less water (you sweat less when you're dehydrated—not good). And if you're significantly heavier, you may get sweatier because fat acts as an insulator and raises core temperature.

**Sometimes I hear a clicking sound in my jaw when I chew or yawn. Is that bad?**

—Jackie, Astoria, NY

It could be TMJ syndrome, which affects an estimated 10 million Americans. The clicking usually isn't painful, though your jaw can get achy, and it often goes away on its own within weeks or months. TMJ is most often caused by teeth grinding and jaw clenching, which cause the jaw muscles to spasm and displace a disk in the joint (the source of that clicking!). The obvious solution: Stop grinding and clenching. If it's a stress response, find ways to manage it. Or ask your dentist about a mouth guard.

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