

The Apple Watch won't make you healthier

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The new Apple watch.

Justin Sullivan

Yesterday, Apple self-declared another revolution in technology with the unveiling of the [Apple Watch](http://www.vox.com/2014/9/9/6127087/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-apple-watch) (<http://www.vox.com/2014/9/9/6127087/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-apple-watch>). The new wearable gadget won't just tell the time, of course. It's also a fitness tracker that can "help us all stay fit throughout the day," said Apple CEO Tim Cook.

The watch monitors and displays your heart rate, how much activity you've done

that day, how long you've been sitting, and calories burned, thanks to a super-sensitive accelerometer. All of this information — and data from your other health apps — feeds into a new Apple platform called HealthKit, which essentially acts like a dashboard of personal health information. It's designed to make monitoring your fitness goals, and improving on them, simpler. "Apple Watch gives us the ability to motivate people to be more active and more healthy," Cook exclaimed.

This gadget and the new software will certainly make analyzing data easier, and it may even be more precise than other wearable technologies. But the claims to an Apple-shaped health revolution deserve some scrutiny: the [evidence \(http://endeavourpartners.net/assets/Wearables-and-the-Science-of-Human-Behavior-Change-EP4.pdf\)](http://endeavourpartners.net/assets/Wearables-and-the-Science-of-Human-Behavior-Change-EP4.pdf) on existing wearables suggests that — like all other silver-bullet solutions for health — they haven't yet figured out how to make habit change stick.

Will the Apple Watch make people healthier?

Natasha Dow Schüll, an MIT anthropologist who has been studying the science of self-tracking and behavior change for her forthcoming book *Keeping Track* told Vox, "Even with the automated devices that just track you, like Jawbone and Fitbit, usually you still have to do something to keep using it — making sure to wear the thing, recharging it — and reports have shown there's a drop off in use after about two months."

As [this study \(http://endeavourpartners.net/assets/Wearables-and-the-Science-of-Human-Behavior-Change-EP4.pdf\)](http://endeavourpartners.net/assets/Wearables-and-the-Science-of-Human-Behavior-Change-EP4.pdf) of behavior change and wearables found, "the dirty secret" about these devices is that they "fail to drive long-term sustained engagement for a majority of users." After a few months, the novelty wears off, excitement wanes, and people are back to their old ways, if they ever changed them to begin with.

Those who use the devices religiously over the longer term tend to be health focused already. Wearables are just another tool in their already well-stocked fitness arsenal.

When modest changes are recorded as a result of tracking, Schüll added, it's difficult to untangle whether the devices are having an impact, or it's just the fact that by collecting data, people are paying more attention to what they're doing with their bodies.

Consider a [2013 Pew survey](#) (



Fitbit. (Photo courtesy of [Mark Cacovic/Moment Mobil](#) (<http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/typing-on-laptop-wearing-a-fitbit-news-photo/494842661>))

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/28/tracking-for-health/>), which found that Americans with chronic conditions like diabetes are more likely to track their health indicators (diet, weight) and report that it helps them maintain their health. But they didn't necessarily use gadgetry. Just the act of tracking — even "in their heads" — was helpful.

"So everyone agrees that the metrics are good and getting better, the algorithms for analyzing the behavior are better," Schüll summed up. "But the sticking point continues to be habit and behavior change, and how you do that."

Everyone is searching for the holy grail of behavior change

To figure that out, a cottage industry of "habit pundits" or "behavior design" experts who mix motivational psychology with behavioral wisdom has emerged.

They're leading an effort to try to design technologies that respond to specific personality types in the hopes of inspiring lasting change. "The social butterfly will respond if they're in a community where they'll get pressure or kudos," Schüll said. "Others are introverts who find intrinsic satisfaction in looking at their data. People are struggling to come up with the way forward."

In time, these folks may be able to figure out how wearable tracking devices can improve the health of every user. And just because the devices that exist so far haven't been shown to be super helpful doesn't mean they don't have potential, said Schüll. Maybe the new Apple Watch, with its customizable interface and personalized designs, will be a step in the right direction. Maybe Apple will offer more effective prompts and nudges that could do the trick. "But the technology is so new that we just don't know yet what's going to happen with it."

For now, applying common sense is probably useful: For centuries, everyone — not just those who can afford the latest Apple tricks — has had access to other less sexy technologies (scales, measuring tapes) that provide extremely accurate and predictive data about your health (weight, the measure of your waist) and those haven't spurred behavior change or reversed the trajectory of the obesity crisis in America.

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