Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Patients, Doctors See Mobile Health App Benefits, but Privacy Concerns Remain

Report/Produced by: Ali Budner
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There’s a seemingly endless list of mobile applications designed to help patients manage their fitness, nutrition and mental well-being. Doctors are also using mobile medical apps to monitor their patients’ chronic diseases. And researchers are employing apps to collect health data. But in all of these scenarios, people are often entering sensitive health information into their devices, raising some concerns about privacy and data use.

This is a report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Ali Budner.

Whitney Zatzkin is a 35-year-old public administrator from Washington, D.C., who describes herself as a member of the "digerati."

(Zatzkin): "I'm the person who's up at 3 a.m. ordering the Apple Watch. That's definitely me in my household."

So it comes as little surprise that she uses apps on her smartphone to help her manage her medical conditions. She has an app for her asthma.

(Zatzkin): "When you actuate your inhaler it pings up a GPS coordinate to an app on your mobile phone and that helps you know if you're exposed to certain things."

She also has multiple food allergies and uses a diet-tracking app to monitor what she's eaten and how her body reacts. When she broke out in hives recently, she opened her diet app to see what foods may have been the culprit and then shared that information with her doctor.

(Zatzkin): "It wasn't just a conversation about, 'Hey I got this curious rash! It was a conversation of, 'I had a rash happen. Here's a couple strange things I did in the 24 hours beforehand. Let's figure out what we can do to cross things off the list.'"

It's not just the "digerati" like Zatzkin who are using mobile health and wellness apps. According to the Pew Research Center, seven out of 10 U.S. adults say they track at least one health indicator via their mobile device. Zatzkin says she sees this as a primarily patient-led movement. But doctors are getting in the game, too.
According to a study by Manhattan Research, more than a third of U.S. physicians in 2014 recommended that patients use one or more health apps.

Evan Muse -- a cardiologist in La Jolla, Calif., and a fellow with the Scripps Translational Science Institute -- is one of those doctors. He uses several apps to help his patients monitor blood pressure and arrhythmias during the time in between visits.

(Muse): "One of the things these mobile apps are doing is empowering our patients. Making them more of the decision-making process, the data-gathering process, the disease management process. Much more than 'Oh yeah my doctor told me to take this pill.'"

But it's the data collected through mobile apps -- and what might be done with it -- that worries Deborah Peel, a psychiatrist and the founder of Patient Privacy Rights.

(Peel): "Unless you've been under a rock for the last four years, you certainly know that technology can be very beneficial. The discussion we've never had in this country is about the harms."

Peel says there are lots of health apps she would love to use.

(Peel): "But every time I look at the privacy policies and what they're gonna do, you can typically see that they're going to use it in ways you'd never expect or want, and you're not gonna have any trail of custody for where that data goes."

Deborah Estrin, professor of computer science at Cornell Tech and cofounder of Open mHealth, says she's less concerned about the apps used in clinical context with a doctor's oversight, but when it comes to apps people are downloading and subscribing to on their own ...

(Estrin): "If your mobile health medical data goes up to a vendor of that particular health app or device, your data goes to them ... Then what rights do you have and what rights do they have over the data that they capture across their user base?"

She recommends that consumers and patients make sure ...

(Estrin): ... that there's not a lot of data kept ... on the mobile device, that the data is uploaded through an encrypted channel, and the entity to whom you're uploading your data, that the terms of service are comfortable in terms of how they'll use your data.

Cardiologist Evan Muse agrees.

(Muse): "People want to be a part of building a healthier environment. They want to be a part of a bigger process of data gathering and analytics."
The citizen science movement. ... But they should have the decision. It shouldn’t be opt out. It should be opt in.”

The privacy policies for both of the health apps that Whitney Zatzkin uses say they don’t share the user's personal information. But she knows she's not immune to data breaches.

(Zatzkin): "I just received a letter from my insurance company that the EHR had been accessed through some portal. I don’t see that as a mobile health issue, I see that as a global Internet issue. Everybody has to take steps to be precautionary and protect their own information."

This has been a report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you’d like to have addressed, please email us at IHB@CHCF.org. I'm Ali Budner, thanks for listening.