

iPhone quit-smoking apps not up to par

February 8 2011, By Randy Dotinga



A new study finds that iPhone software applications designed to help people quit smoking fall short of the mark because they do not meet accepted standards.

Among other things, the study, which appears online and in the March issue of the [American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#), found that the 47 “apps” reviewed rarely helped users get assistance through counseling, hotlines or anti-smoking medications. About half of the apps supported hypnosis, which has questionable effectiveness.

“They were pretty poor. There wasn’t one I thought I could recommend to a smoker,” said study lead author Lorien Abrams, a professor of health communication and marketing at George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services.

Even so, apps do hold potential to be a valuable tool to help people stop [smoking](#), Abroms said. Researchers have already shown that text messages provide helpful motivation to people who are trying to quit, and she believes smartphones might be even more useful because they are capable of providing a fuller multimedia experience. “You’ve got a great tool in your pocket,” she said.

The iPhone apps reviewed by Abroms and colleagues — including both free and paid applications that were available in 2009 — did not make the grade, although they did some of the right things.

“They’d give you personalized motivation, and at least a quarter of them would ask you how much you smoke and when you plan to quit, and then they’d give you personalized feedback about the money you’d save and what you’d gain,” she said. “What they did terribly is that they didn’t recommend or refer to a quit line.”

Also, she said, “on the whole, they didn’t mention using nicotine replacement therapy, which has been proven to help people quit smoking. And very few apps helped you to get social support or reminded you to get it, which is also crucial to quitting smoking.”

Abroms added that about half of the apps in the study embraced hypnosis. She said there is no evidence that hypnosis helps people quit smoking.

Frances Stillman, an associate professor of health, behavior and society at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said the study findings make sense because they focus on the availability of proven techniques. She believes that behavioral therapy, along with anti-smoking medications when necessary, is the ideal approach to smoking cessation, although “it’s not a one-size-fits-all thing.”

It is important, she said, to connect people to the right resources, “understanding that it may take them a number of tries before they finally quit for good.”

What’s next for apps? Abroms said the Legacy Foundation, which advocates against smoking, has released a promising [iPhone app](#). She said she hopes other public health groups will follow.

More information: iPhone apps for smoking cessation: a content analysis. *Am J Prev Med* 40(3), 2011.

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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