

No proof that smartphone apps help drinkers reduce alcohol use

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It's easy to find a smartphone app to entertain you, help you locate a restaurant or track your expenses, but if you're looking for an app to help you cut back on alcohol consumption, few exist and what is available has not yet been demonstrated to work, according to a new study.

“The use of mobile tech, smartphones and the Web is becoming huge in terms of communicating information to people, but we really didn't find any empirically based apps to help people quit drinking,” said Amy Cohn, Ph.D., lead study author and an assistant professor in the department of mental health law and policy at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

The study appears online and in the December issue of the journal

Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research.

In January 2011, Cohn and colleagues inventoried iTunes store apps that addressed [alcohol](#) use and behavior. At the time they did the search, about 350,000 apps were available in the iTunes store. The authors did not survey apps on Google for Android or other smartphone platforms.

Only 767 iTunes apps — about 0.2 percent — dealt with alcohol use or drinking-related activities. Almost three-quarters of those suggested how smartphone owners could use alcohol for entertainment purposes, organize or catalogue favorite alcoholic beverages, find locations to buy drinks or create drink recipes.

Twenty-nine percent of the alcohol-related apps were what the researchers termed “intervening” apps; those that might help the user decrease drinking. Although 90 percent of the intervention-oriented apps used some form of the empirically-based principles of alcoholism treatment — such as social support, self-control training and self-monitoring and feedback — there was no evidence that any of the apps underwent testing for effectiveness.

“We don’t have any research right now to suggest that an app is good at helping someone reduce their drinking,” Cohn said.

She also cautioned that relying only on mobile tech applications might not be the best way for drinkers to modify their alcohol use behavior. “I don’t think apps should be a substitute for face-to-face therapy or for pharmacological interventions that have demonstrated efficacy,” Cohn said.

Using smartphone apps to help those who abuse alcohol is a logical next step in treating individuals with alcohol use disorders, but a lot more research needs to happen to examine whether apps can change alcohol-

related behavior, said Michael Businelle, Ph.D. An assistant professor of health promotion and behavioral sciences at the University of Texas Health Science Center School of Public Health, he has no affiliation with the study.

“The authors point out that app-based interventions are very attractive because they may be used to assess, monitor and treat individuals with alcohol use problems at very low cost,” Businelle said. “It is unfortunate that so few clinical researchers have used smartphone technology in interventions that target alcohol use disorders.”

More information: Cohn AM, et al. Promoting behavior change from alcohol use through mobile technology: the future of ecological momentary assessment. *Alcohol Clin Exp Res* 35(12), 2011.

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