

Siri, help me quit: What does your smart device say when you ask for help with addiction?

January 29 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Can a smart device help you quit drinking, smoking, vaping or taking opioids?

As it turns out, the leading [smart device](#) conversational agents, including Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri, Google Assistant, Microsoft Cortana and Samsung Bixby fail to help, but they could play a big role in the future, according to an article published by *NPJ Digital Medicine* led by Dr. Alicia L. Nobles and Dr. John W. Ayers of the Center for Data Driven Health at the Qualcomm Institute within the University of California San Diego.

Already, half of U.S. adults use intelligent virtual assistants. Moreover, many of the makers of intelligent virtual assistants are poised to roll out health care advice, including personalized wellness strategies. The study asks whether intelligent virtual assistants provide actionable health support now.

"One of the dominant health issues of the decade is the nation's ongoing addiction crisis, notably opioids, alcohol and vaping. As a result, it is an ideal case study to begin exploring the ability of intelligent virtual assistants to provide actionable answers for obvious health questions," said Dr. Ayers.

The study team asked Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri, Google Assistant, Microsoft Cortana and Samsung Bixby to "help me quit..." followed by drugs and various [substances](#) including alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and opioids (e.g., "help me quit drinking"). Among 70 help-seeking queries, the intelligent virtual assistants returned actionable responses only four times, with the most common response being confusion (e.g., "did I say something wrong?"). Of those that returned a response, "help me quit drugs" on Alexa returned a definition for drugs, "help me quit smoking" and "help me quit tobacco" on Google Assistant returned Dr. QuitNow (a smoking cessation app), while "help me quit pot" on Siri returned a promotion for a marijuana retailer.

While the treatment of substance misuse is extremely complex,

intelligent virtual assistants have the potential to provide meaningful help. "Thanks to free federally managed remote substance misuse treatment or treatment referral services like 1-800-662-HELP for alcohol or drugs and 1-800-QUIT-NOW for smoking or vaping, we can encourage people to take the first step toward treatment by having intelligent virtual assistants promote 1-800 helplines," said Dr. Nobles.

"1-800 helplines are central to the national strategy for addressing substance misuse," added Dr. Eric C. Leas, a study co-author also with the center. "For instance, calling 1-800-Quit-Now when you're thinking about quitting smoking is the gold-standard advice an intelligent virtual assistant can instantaneously provide at the moment someone is asking for help."

The team notes there is evidence of capacity among the makers of intelligent virtual assistants to build in these resources quickly. "Alexa can already fart on demand, why can't it and other intelligent virtual assistants also provide life saving substance use treatment referrals for those desperately seeking help? Many of these same people likely have no one else to turn to except the smart device in their pocket," added Dr. Ayers.

Of course, the team recognizes that there are substantial challenges ahead for [technology companies](#) to address health issues, but are still optimistic that their findings will prove actionable. "Only 10 percent of Americans that need treatment for substance misuse receive it. Because intelligent virtual assistants return the optimal answer to a query, they can provide a huge advantage in disseminating resources to the public. Updating intelligent virtual assistants to accommodate help-seeking for substance misuse could become a core and immensely successful mission for how tech companies address health in the future," concluded Dr. Nobles.

More information: *NPJ Digital Medicine*, [DOI: 10.1038/s41746-019-0215-9](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41746-019-0215-9)

Provided by University of California - San Diego

Citation: Siri, help me quit: What does your smart device say when you ask for help with addiction? (2020, January 29) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-01-siri-smart-device-addiction.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--