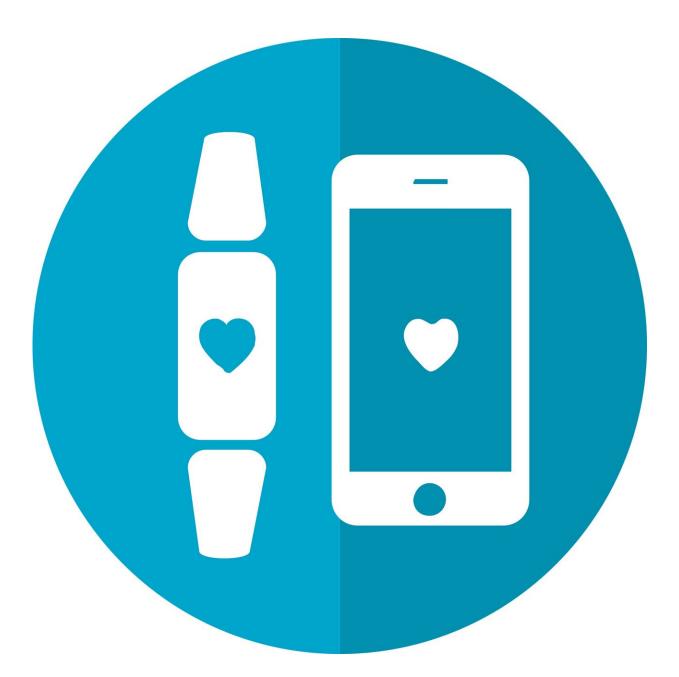# Using an activity tracker to achieve your exercise goals? Where it can help, where it probably won't

January 16 2024, by Corneel Vandelanotte

It's that time of year when many people are getting started on their resolutions for the year ahead. Doing more physical activity is a popular and [worthwhile](#) goal.

If you're hoping to be more active in 2024, perhaps you've invested in an activity tracker, or you're considering buying one.

But what are the benefits of activity trackers? And will a basic tracker do the trick, or do you need a fancy one with lots of features? Let's take a look.

Why use an activity tracker?

One of the [most powerful predictors](#) for being active is whether or not [you are monitoring](#) how active you are.

Most people have a vague idea of how active they are, but this is inaccurate a lot of the time. Once people consciously start to keep track of how much activity they do, they often realize it's less than what they thought, and this motivates them to be more active.

You can self-monitor without an activity tracker (just by writing down what you do), but this method is hard to keep up in the long run and it's also a lot less accurate compared to devices that track your every move 24/7.

By tracking steps or "activity minutes" you can ascertain whether or not

you are meeting the physical activity guidelines (150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per week).

It also allows you to track how you're progressing with any personal activity goals, and view your progress over time. All this would be difficult without an activity tracker.

Research has shown the most popular brands of activity trackers are generally reliable when it comes to tracking basic measures such as steps and activity minutes.

But wait, there's more

Many activity trackers on the market nowadays track a range of other measures which their manufacturers promote as important in monitoring health and fitness. But is this really the case? Let's look at some of these.

Resting heart rate

This is your heart rate at rest, which is normally somewhere between 60 and 100 beats per minute. Your resting heart rate will gradually go down as you become fitter, especially if you're doing a lot of high-intensity exercise. Your risk of dying of any cause (all-cause mortality) is much lower when you have a low resting heart rate.

So, it is useful to keep an eye on your resting heart rate. Activity trackers are pretty good at tracking it, but you can also easily measure your heart rate by monitoring your pulse and using a stopwatch.

Heart rate during exercise

Activity trackers will also measure your heart rate when you're active.

To improve fitness efficiently, professional athletes focus on having their heart rate in certain "zones" when they're exercising—so knowing their heart rate during exercise is important.

But if you just want to be more active and healthier, without a specific training goal in mind, you can exercise at a level that feels good to you and not worry about your heart rate during activity. The most important thing is that you're being active.

Also, a dedicated heart rate monitor with a strap around your chest will do a much better job at measuring your actual heart rate compared to an activity tracker worn around your wrist.

Maximal heart rate

This is the hardest your heart could beat when you're active, not something you could sustain very long. Your maximal heart rate is not influenced by how much exercise you do, or your fitness level.

Most activity trackers don't measure it accurately anyway, so you might as well forget about this one.

VO$_2$max

Your muscles need oxygen to work. The more oxygen your body can process, the harder you can work, and therefore the fitter you are.

VO$_2$max is the volume (V) of oxygen (O$_2$) we could breathe maximally (max) over a one minute interval, expressed as milliliters of oxygen per kilogram of body weight per minute (ml/kg/min). Inactive women and men would have a VO$_2$max lower than 30 and 40 ml/kg/min, respectively. A reasonably good VO$_2$max would be mid thirties and

higher for women and mid forties and higher for men.

VO$_2$max is another measure of fitness that [correlates well](link) with all-cause mortality: the higher it is, the lower your risk of dying.

For athletes, VO$_2$max is usually measured in a lab on a treadmill while wearing a mask that measures oxygen consumption. Activity trackers instead look at your running speed (using a GPS chip) and your [heart](link) rate and compare these measures to values from other people.

If you can run fast with a low [heart rate](link) your tracker will assume you are relatively fit, resulting in a higher VO$_2$max. These estimates are [not very accurate](link) as they are based on lots of assumptions. However, the error of the measurement is reasonably consistent. This means if your VO$_2$max is gradually increasing, you are likely to be getting fitter.

So what's the take-home message? Focus on how many steps you take every day or the number of activity minutes you achieve. Even a basic activity tracker will measure these factors relatively accurately. There is no real need to track other measures and pay more for an activity tracker that records them, unless you are getting really serious about exercise.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](link) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](link).

Provided by The Conversation

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.