



Photo: Bryan Smith

Tech Coach Corner – Smart Watches as Medical Alert Devices?

by LTCL Coach Bryan Smith

Last year, someone came into a Tech Coaching session with a question (and a magazine advertisement): “Should I get a medical alert device, and if so, how do I pick one?” I thought it was a great question as I had been thinking about my own older relatives who have these medical alert devices, sitting on their kitchen counter doing absolutely no good and costing a monthly subscription fee. Medical alert devices are typically designed to be worn as a necklace or bracelet and provide the person with the ability to call emergency services at any moment.

Together, this patron and I looked at several devices and I started developing a list of criteria to compare the different products. We compared the following devices, knowing that there are many more available on the market:

- Medical Alert
- Lively Mobile
- Medical Guardian
- Apple Watch (as this patron lived in a home with Apple iPhones, iPads, and a MacBook laptop)
- Samsung Galaxy Watch

We then developed a list of criteria to measure against each of these products:

- a) Price (initial as well as recurring charges over time)
- b) Voice commands (in case someone is unable to push a button to call for help)
- c) Necklace option (yes or no)
- d) Compliance (the likelihood that the product would NOT sit on the kitchen counter)

Some of these products were “free” but came with significant monthly charges... as high as \$50 per month. All options had the ability to press a button to call for help, but only two had the option for voice commands (Apple Watch and Samsung Galaxy Watch). All of them had the ability to wear the device as a necklace, even the [watches](#). The compliance criterium is a very subjective criteria that only the user can assess, but it’s a critical one because in order for the device to be effective, it must be accessible at all times.

What we quickly discovered was that the smart watch devices were the winner in terms of price after approximately 14-18 months. So, while the initial cost of the watches is around \$450 to \$500, the monthly fee for cellular service on the watch, when added to an existing cellphone agreement, was around \$13 on the most popular cellular providers.

So, why go with one of these other devices when you could have a smart watch that also

1. Monitors your heart and some even alert you to an irregular heartbeat
2. Tracks your exercise
3. Can detect falls and automatically call emergency services (not all smart watches have this function)
4. Provides other apps, like map directions, weather, texting, and even a calculator
5. Looks great on your wrist!

To me, it seems like smart watches are the perfect medical alert device.

When evaluating smart watches, consider:

- Compatibility with cellphone. Most smart watches require integration with a cellphone. Of the most popular smart watches, only the Apple Watch requires an Apple iPhone – the others work with Android-based phones or Apple iPhones. In other words, if you don’t have an iPhone, then you need to steer clear of the Apple Watch.
- Battery life. The range is anywhere from 18 hours (Apple Watch) to several days (Samsung, Garmin)
- Water resistance / waterproof. This is not only important for swimming, but if you want to wear the watch while bathing which is a problematic fall situation.
- Cellular capability. Important in those cases where your phone is not within range of your smart watch.

This column’s purpose isn’t to recommend one smart watch over another one, but to instead provide a methodology that you can follow to select one for your needs.

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