



Activity trackers are better at counting steps than counting calories.

# On Track

STEVE DEBENPORT/ISTOCK

**DID SANTA DELIVER A FITBIT—OR SOME OTHER WEARABLE? HERE'S HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT.** *By Marygrace Taylor*

**N**OW THAT THE HOLIDAY GIFTS HAVE BEEN UNWRAPPED, AN ESTIMATED 40 million Americans own a wearable activity device. That's a big chunk of the population tracking their every move (or lack thereof) with gadgets. If you're one of them, though, how do you translate all that data into real health and wellness gains this year?

Fitness trackers rely on sensors to monitor things like motion, direction and even how fast blood is pumping through your body. Using that information, they provide data on steps, sleep quality and calories burned.

"These are great motivational tools that help with something we're all struggling with: being sedentary," says Mark Berman, MD, a member of the board of directors for the American College of Lifestyle Medicine.

Despite consistent improvements, though, no tracker is 100 percent accurate. The most reliable function is the simplest: counting steps, says Deborah Riebe, PhD, professor of exercise science at the University of Rhode Island. In fact, findings show that most are at least 90 percent accurate at the task.

But it's another story when it comes to measuring calories burned. When researchers

with the American Council on Exercise tested five popular trackers, they found all of the devices over- or underestimated energy expenditure—some by as much as 60 percent. So it's better to use those numbers for comparison, Riebe says. If your tracker says you burned twice as many calories today than yesterday, for instance, you were clearly much more active.

Likewise, while wearables with a sleep tracking function can give you a sense of how much you tossed and turned, you should be skeptical of devices that claim to know how much time you spend in various stages of sleep, which can only be detected by measuring brain activity.

Strapping on your Fitbit, Garmin or Jawbone is easy—but using it to make meaningful lifestyle changes can take a little more work. Here, some helpful hints from the pros who know best.

**Find your starting point.** For the first few days of wearing your tracker, try not to make any changes to your usual routine. "This will give you a sense of your baseline activity level," Berman explains. Once you know how active you normally are, you can start thinking about how you want to improve.

**Personalize your goals.** On many fitness trackers, the daily default goal is 10,000 steps.

But there's no evidence showing that's the optimal number for health, says Riebe. "When you're starting out, just compare you to you. If you only get 3,000 steps a day and you can get up to 4,000 or 5,000," you're on the right track, she says. On the other hand, if you're easily hitting the 10,000 mark, increase your daily goal to 15,000 steps.

**Look at the big picture.** It's normal to have days where you are more or less active. So instead of looking at each day individually, see how your steps average out over the week. "It's less about knowing exactly how many steps you took and more about relative change," says Berman.

**Keep wearing it!** Market research suggests that up to one-third of consumers stop using their devices within six months. "But if you stop wearing it, you'll go back to your old habits," Riebe says. Figure out a way to make your device a regular part of your routine—like putting it on when you brush your teeth in the morning—so you're less likely to quit or forget. ●

## The Lineup

*Still in the market for a tracker? Here are our picks at a range of prices.*

### Jawbone UP2

Like most wearables at this price, the UP2 doesn't offer a readout—meaning you'll have to check your smartphone to get the details of your activity for the day. But it does track steps, calories and sleep (\$99.99, major retailers).



### Fitbit Charge HR

It costs more than Fitbit's popular Flex model, but this tracker offers tons more advantages, from a buckle wristband to real-time heart rate monitoring (\$149.95, major retailers).

### Polar A360

The latest from the veteran wearable brand displays your step count, calories burned and heart rate on a full-color touchscreen readout, and vibrates to alert you when you've been inactive for too long (\$199.95, polar.com).

