Tests expand on whether wearables could predict coronavirus

28 May 2020, by Mike Snider

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Research is expanding into whether wearable devices such as an Apple Watch or Fitbit could track a person with coronavirus or the flu, or perhaps detect and even predict the onset of disease in a wearer.

The potential for such data-driven advances could be reassuring as the nation reopens after the shutdown to prevent the spread of the virus, which causes the COVID-19 disease. More than 1 in 5 Americans (21%) already wear some type of smartwatch or fitness tracker, according to Pew Research Center.

Fitbit has announced its own Fitbit COVID-19 Study to "help determine whether Fitbit can help build an algorithm to detect COVID-19 before symptoms start," the company says in a recent blog post. It is seeking participants who are 21 or older and have had or currently have COVID-19 or flu-related symptoms.

Fitbit, along with Apple, is also collaborating with the Stanford Healthcare Innovation Lab on its COVID-19 Wearables Study. "We hope to be able

to predict the onset even before any symptoms start," the researchers say on the Stanford study's signup page.

The Stanford lab is looking for people who use a wearable and have had a confirmed or suspected case of coronavirus, been exposed to a known or suspected case or are among frontline essential personnel such as health care workers or grocery store workers.

In addition to Apple Watch and Fitbit wearables, the lab is also seeking wearers of Empatica and Garmin devices, Oura Ring, and other wearables that measure heart rate. (The study plans to have Android support for its MyPHD app so Galaxy Fit and Galaxy Watch devices can be used more easily. Currently, those devices must connect the Samsung Health app to Apple Health.)

Also already underway is the Scripps Research Translational Institute's DETECT (Digital Engagement & Tracking for Early Control & Treatment) Study to monitor heart rates as a possible way to detect and track coronavirus, flu and other viral infections. As in the other studies, users share the health data captured by the Apple Watch, Fitbit and Garmin devices. For more information on the study, go to the DETECTStudy.org site.

Earlier this year, Scripps' first study on using wearable device data to study flu outbreaks was referenced in The Lancet as "encouraging proof of concept in this direction."

Scripps researchers expanded the flu study to see if tracking of data (heart rate, activity, and sleep) using the MyDataHelps mobile app can help predict whether someone will eventually get the flu, COVID-19 or other illness.

"In light of the ongoing flu season and the global pandemic of COVID-19, we see enormous

opportunity to improve disease tracking for improved population health," says Jennifer Radin, Ph.D., the epidemiologist leading the DETECT study.

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