CHOOSE WISELY: SELECTING MOBILE HEALTH APPS

More and more people are looking to their mobile devices for health information and tracking. However, with thousands of different mobile applications (apps) out there, trying to choose ones that are reliable and effective can be a daunting task. The following questions can help you evaluate different apps and choose the best one for your situation and goal.

Six questions to ask when looking for mobile health apps:

1. Who developed the app and why?
2. Does the app contain factual information based on reliable resources?
3. Is the app up-to-date?
4. How has the app been received? Did it receive positive reviews?
5. Have you considered the cost of the app?
6. Does the app require data access to function?

Question 1: Who developed the app and why?

Identify what organization developed and maintains the app and for what purpose – both should be clear. Is the app a Department of Defense (DoD), federal government, university, health organization or non-profit, hospital, or commercial product? It is important to consider why this organization manages this app. Does the site provide health information to help educate audiences, promote a particular opinion, or advertise a product? A business may provide you with helpful information, but many are also trying to sell you a product or a service and may not report all the facts. On the other hand, the goal of government agencies is to provide credible information to help people learn about health conditions, treatment options, or resources. When searching for an app, start with those developed by government agencies.

Question 2: Does the app contain factual information based on reliable resources?

You should rely on unbiased information, supported by research or evidence rather than opinions. You can fact check the information against other similar apps and websites, to see if the information is consistent facts or someone's opinion. Also, look at the source of the information for clues. The author should be identified as a qualified professional or organization. Consider whether or not the author has credentials, expertise, or training to provide accurate and credible information. Additionally, opinions and testimonials should be clearly stated and the specific source should be listed. Remember, one person's opinion or personal story is based on their experience, and may not be factual or proven by research.

Question 3: Is the site up-to-date?

Health care and prevention are continually changing fields, and new advances are being made by doctors and researchers every day. The information you are looking at should be current. Check both when the app was published, and when it was last updated. Information should be reviewed and updated at least annually, and these dates should be available on the app's page in the appropriate app store.

Question 4: How has the app been received?

The information in the app store itself is also a great resource for evaluating an app. Reviews by other users provide immediate insight into the value, features, and effectiveness of the app. While each individual review only reflects one person's experience, an app that has received overwhelmingly positive reviews is much more likely to provide a good experience. Similarly, the number of times an app has been downloaded is also an indicator. There are certainly good apps out there that have not received a large volume of downloads; but by and large, apps with downloads in the tens of thousands or greater are popular for a reason – they get the job done.

Question 5: Have you considered the cost of the app?

The cost of an app does not necessarily reflect anything about the quality of that app. However, it is still an important consideration. Before downloading any app, you should be sure you are both aware of and comfortable with any associated charges. Some apps are free, while others may have a one-time charge or subscription fee. Additionally, some apps appear free, but then have in-app charges for different features. Many apps feature "lite" or "trial" versions that are free and have limited features. These can allow you to sample an app, before deciding whether or not to purchase the full version. None of these factors make an app good or bad, but you should know what you are getting into before downloading.

Question 6: Does the app require data access to function?

It is also important to consider whether or not an app requires data access to function. Similarly to the cost of an app, this question does not reflect the quality of the app, but rather how it functions and whether or not it will meet your needs. Many apps need to reference large amounts of information in order to provide their functionality. To save space on your device, and ensure content is always up to date, many apps use the internet or a mobile data connection to remotely access this information from the developer. Other apps save all the relevant information to your device, and can function without data access. Before downloading an app, you should consider whether your work environment (afloat, secure space, etc.) or the costs associated with mobile data, will prevent the app from meeting your needs.