Review: Technology helps with fitness goals

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This undated image provided by RCX5 shows the Polar RCX5 heart monitor. While losing weight and staying fit can be tough, technology can help play an important role in keeping a person accountable, tracking his or her progress and making workouts more effective.
(AP Photo/Polar, USA)

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) -- Many of us know firsthand that losing weight and staying fit can be tough.

For me, I started a journey a little over a year ago to get in better shape before my 30th birthday. While diet and exercise were the ultimate keys to my success, technology played an important role in keeping me accountable, tracking my progress and making my workouts more effective.

Now that I've reached some of my fitness goals, I'd like to share the tools I used. These will be more important to me than ever as I try to maintain my weight loss and improve my strength and endurance. (Cue the "Rocky" theme song).

ACCOUNTABILITY:

Diet and exercise are the most important parts of losing weight or staying in shape. Technology helped me keep tabs on what I was eating and how many calories I was burning.

I used MyFitnessPal, a free service that lets you maintain a digital diary of your food choices, cardio work and strength training.

The service is very simple to use. Because you can update entries using a phone app or a website, you have almost no excuse not to enter the information no matter where you are. Apps are available for the iPhone, the iPad and Android, BlackBerry and Windows Phone devices.

When first using the program, you're prompted for such information as weight, height, age and activity level. That's used to create a plan for how many calories you should eat and what percentage should come from protein, fat or carbohydrates. You can also set your own parameters.

You then enter what you're eating (and drinking) for breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as snacks, throughout the day, and the app records the calories, fat, protein, carbs and vitamins. MyFitnessPal has an extensive list of fresh and packaged foods to choose from. Choose an apple or a can of Campbell's soup, and MyFitnessPal will add the nutritional information to your count. The database also includes popular recipes found in magazines, so you don't have to enter the ingredients individually.

You can even copy an entire meal to another day if you're a creature of habit like me. Or use your phone's camera to take a picture of a barcode and have the app look up the nutritional information for you.

But food is half the battle. MyFitnessPal also lets you enter your workouts and strength training. Just as you do with food, you simply select the activity, such as cleaning, walking the dog, taking a spinning class or, for me, playing ice hockey. Based on your personal health information, the service calculates the number of calories burned. While the numbers are only estimates, they provide a pretty solid guideline.

Once you're done entering your information, you can look at charts, graphs and lists of your diet and exercise to get a better view of your day or week.

The app will project your weight in five weeks and tell you whether you're eating too few or too many calories on any given day. You can even connect with friends and relatives who also are using the service to help keep you even more accountable and get ideas of different foods to try or activities to do.

PROGRESS:

While recording my food and exercise choices became part of my daily routine, tracking my progress helped motivate me to stay on track to getting in better shape.

For this, I enlisted the use of the Withings WiFi Body Scale ($159.99).

This is no ordinary scale. It not only measures your weight, body fat, lean muscle and Body Mass Index, but it also connects to the Internet so you can keep track of your measurements through its website or an iPhone app (iPad and Android versions are coming soon).

You can see how you compare to your personal goals and recommended health zones. You can have the scale automatically share your data with other online health coaching programs, or post results to a blog, Facebook or Twitter. There are no subscription fees.

The scale can track up to eight different people, with separate accounts for each.

A new version of the scale will be able to connect directly to your phone via Bluetooth. For those with iPhones or iPads, there also is a companion blood pressure monitor that hooks directly to your device and lets you know how your rates compare with normal ranges.

EFFECTIVE WORKOUTS:

Logging how many calories you burned during any activity can be a constant guessing game. Many gym-goers rely on general numbers that the treadmill, bicycles or elliptical machines provide, but those aren't always accurate.

There are several options to help track your daily exercise routines. After trying a few different wearable monitors, including the Nike+ FuelBand, I found the most helpful tool was a heart rate monitor.

Basic monitors in the $100 price range can encourage people to get active, while options costing more than $400 are available with accessories that can measure how far you're running or how fast you're cycling. I tested a Polar RCX5 ($349.95 for a basic set, with accessories for GPS and cycling available).

After entering my height, weight and age, I strapped on the elastic band around my chest and clipped in the heart rate monitor that transmits data wirelessly to a unit on my wrist.

After you choose a sport for that workout, such as running, cycling or swimming, the Polar times your workout and tracks your calories burned based on your heart rate. It also estimates what percentage of the burned calories came from fat. I found that moderate activities seem to burn more fat, but fewer calories, while higher-intensity workouts burn more calories, but less fat.

Some of the machines at my gym picked up the information from my monitor and displayed my heart rate. When running outside or playing ice hockey, the heart rate monitor also gave me a better idea of how many calories I was burning (more than 1,000 calories in one hockey game).

When you're done with a workout, all of the exercise information you record can be transferred through your computer to Polar's personal training website, where it's analyzed and tracked to help you reach fitness goals and train more effectively. Knowing about how many calories I burned during a given activity helped make my workouts more effective and understand how I needed to fuel my body accordingly.

EXTRAS:

Let's face it: Going to the gym can get kind of boring. But listening to music, or watching movies and TV shows on your mobile devices, can help keep you motivated while working out at the gym, jogging with the dog or getting pumped up for a hockey game.

And even then, it's important to have the right equipment.

For me, the PowerBeats by Dre ($149.95) stood the sweat test and still provided great sound and the option to answer phone calls and control volume from the earphones.

In the locker room, I paired my iPhone to the Jawbone Jambox ($199.99) to stream music via Bluetooth before and after ice hockey games. This season's postgame song is "Closing Time" by Semisonic, as our games typically end after midnight.

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