Fitness Technologies and Older Adults
Technologies for fitness & health are booming, and seniors are noticing. With a little education—cue our Fitness Technologies Course—their interest can become expertise. It’s a given: staying active improves health and quality of life. In a study of septuagenarians, those who were lifelong exercisers resembled healthy 40-year-olds when researchers looked at heart and lung capacity and muscle fitness. Researchers who tracked more than 1,600 previously sedentary adults, ages 70 to 89, found that getting as little as 48 minutes more of activity a week improved their physical functioning, including their mobility.

Starting or maintaining an active lifestyle can sometimes feel daunting, but fitness technologies can provide the encouragement, social support and information many people need to get and stay on track. From smart phones to smart glasses and wearables, the technology choices don’t just seem endless, they are. In a recent report on fitness technology, researchers found 423 unique devices from 132 different brands. Yet even the most tech-savvy seniors may need a bit of guidance to get started or to learn a new approach. That’s the rationale behind a new Fitness Technologies Course, a series from Senior Planet from AARP in partnership with CDW, a leading provider of information technology in healthcare and other arenas.
Five different fitness platform categories are the focus of the Senior Planet Health and Wellness series. These include:

- **Mobile health apps** such as Google Fit and the iPhone Health app that track anything from your steps to your sleep.

- **Wearable technologies** that are attached to the body, implanted, tattooed or incorporated into clothing, such as smart watches and virtual reality headsets that monitor wellness activities and can guide you through a variety of workouts.

- **Fitness apps** to track not only fitness but also nutrition.

- **Online health resources**, ranging from medical websites to YouTube workouts and recipes on Pinterest, that can educate, motivate and inspire.

- **IoT Healthcare**—IoT or the Internet of Things is, simply, a giant network of connected devices—that help people accomplish a number of tasks, including monitoring blood pressure, tracking sleep or activity or video conferencing to improve health and fitness.
Senior Planet instructors and participants already plugged in know the value of fitness technologies. One instructor Tina Wang tells seniors: the free apps have pros and cons. MyFitnessPal, for instance, a smart phone app and website that tracks diet and exercise, has a paid and a free version. “It’s jam-packed with useful features,” she says. Among them—you can customize wellness goals, track steps and calories burned at the same time and listen to educational videos. But? “Like many free apps, you’ll have to tolerate ads,” she says.

Insight Timer, a smart phone app, is an online community for meditation. “It has helped thousands of people cultivate peace of mind, improve sleep quality and manage stress and anxiety through guided meditation,” says another instructor, Cas Castro. Set the timer for 5, 10 or 15 minutes (or more); after you meditate 10 consecutive days you get a milestone award to honor your commitment. For the yoga-curious, there is the Down Dog app, offering recorded yoga classes you can tailor to your wishes.

Senior Planet participant Justina Schwemberger, 73, retired microbiologist in Rockville, MD, uses a tracker to meet her fitness goals. She advises fellow members not to expect perfection from technology. “It gives you sort of an idea of what you have done,” she says. Which is much more than you would know, of course, without technology.

Whatever technology a person chooses, activity is likely to increase, as Hansa Govan, 66, a retired insurance account manager in Hayward, CA, found. Using a Fitbit upped her daily step count, especially before she retired. “When you have a sitting job, you don’t realize you don’t have [much] movement.” Once she started with the wearables, her daily step count of 2,000 rose to 7,000 to 10,000.
Any senior still reluctant to embrace fitness technology might be persuaded to give it a try after hearing about David Hill, 64, of New York, a lifelong athlete and lover of technology. “I had a Fitbit way back when you clipped it onto your belt,” he says. “I kept losing it.” These days, his Garmin watch is his go-to. “It shows you what you’ve done, activity wise, your heart rate, and it also gives you your pace, your cadence, which is important for runners. I was never the kind of person to keep a training log, but it does it for you, and compares how you did, month to month. It also reminds you to move, if you are sitting for a long time.”

Before the COVID pandemic, Hill was at his usual full tilt—yoga, gym fitness classes, running, cycling to work 10 miles round trip. Then came a painful Achilles tendon injury, which he blames on his lack of cross-training due to COVID restrictions. In early 2020, he was named as one of 5 Senior Planet Sponsored Athletes and worked to overcome injury, leaning on technology to regain his fitness. Besides the Garmin, he relies on Zoom, YouTube, boot camp runs, long walks, running and Central Park birding. He’s back!
The Fitness Technologies Course reflects the original vision of Tom Kamber, who founded OATS (Older Adults Technology Services) in 2004 to keep adults age 60-plus plugged in—or to teach them how to plug in if they are newcomers. Doing so, he believes, will not only banish isolation but keep seniors fit, well and socially connected. While technology helps seniors meet those goals, it’s the route, not the destination, he says. “What we are really about is changing aging,” he says. Technology education like the Fitness Technologies Course promises to do just that.

From a single class in Brooklyn, Senior Planet’s offerings grew to six locations and now has no boundaries with virtual programming. Wellness class hours have totaled 811, and older adults have participated in Senior Planet from AARP’s online programming in fitness and other wellness topics over 140,000 times since March, 2020. In all, 774 programs have been presented in 999 sessions.

Wearables in Action

The most popular classes have become a habit for many members, providing both fitness opportunity and a chance to zoom-socialize, as Sally Isaacson, 78, a Denver retired accountant, knows. “Each morning at 8 mountain standard time I do morning stretch with Cas on Senior Planet. I do this Monday through Friday and it always starts my day off right.” Before this new habit, she was sedentary. There’s also Fit Fusion (for cardio pumping), mindful meditation and breathing, a balance and strength class, chair yoga, tai chi, exercise to boost bone health and more.
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Conclusion

Fitness technology options haven’t peaked, experts say, nor have seniors’ interest in them. While new technology can be frustrating initially, getting instruction makes it easier.

Two senior planet members talk about how they have worked fitness wearables into their daily routines.

Embrace the challenge, suggests Rita Dhawan, 66, a retired scientist in Maryland who has used a variety of wearables. Once you learn how to use a technology, "you are going to be keeping track of your health much, much better," she says.

Malvina Abbott, 78, of San Diego, a public defender and another regular at the morning stretch class, believes in diving right in to learn new technology. She uses her smart watch constantly. "I swim almost every single day. It keeps track of my strokes, the time, my breathing.” It also tracks her steps on her walk and keeps track of calories. Her tip: the user is in control, and how much you use technology is up to you.

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