

Fitbit Surge Review

●●●●● 5.0 Exemplary

By **Jill Duffy**

January 29, 2015



THE BOTTOM LINE

With continuous heart rate monitoring, GPS, and broad appeal, the Fitbit Surge is the best all-day fitness tracker to date.

MSRP \$249.95

\$249.95 at Fitbit

[See It](#)

\$249.99 at Amazon

[See It](#)

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PROS

- ✓ Continuous heart rate monitoring.
- ✓ Built-in GPS.
- ✓ Comfortable, secure fit.
- ✓ Tracks new activities like hiking, yoga, and weight-lifting workouts.
- ✓ Excellent app and easy syncing.
- ✓ Supports incoming texts and call notifications.

✓ Accurate.

CONS

- ✗ Limited push notifications.
- ✗ Moderately large.
- ✗ Not waterproof for swimming.
- ✗ Below average battery life with GPS enabled.
- ✗ Charger not interchangeable with other Fitbits.

Of all the brands of fitness trackers on the market, Fitbit takes the trophy for being the most well known, and for good reason. The company has been iterating and spinning out different versions of its original Fitbit Ultra smart pedometer since 2011 (2008 if you start counting since the initial public concept reveal). Its latest and most advanced fitness tracker to date, the Fitbit Surge (\$249.95), is a rather sophisticated piece of machinery in the form of a touch-screen wristwatch. It not only tracks your steps and sleep, but also alerts you to incoming phone calls and text messages, keeps tabs on your heart rate with a built-in optical heart rate monitor, uses GPS to track outdoor activity, and has much more functionality especially for runners.

The new device is an upgrade in the truest sense of the word. It's a better device than the Charge (\$83.95 at Amazon) or Flex (\$139.99 at Amazon), a nicer wristwatch with more expensive parts, that also brings new options for what you will want to do with it, in terms of upping your fitness routine. Upgrade your tracker, upgrade your life.

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The Surge isn't a perfect activity tracker, runner's watch, or smartwatch, but nothing is. What the Surge gets right is the blend of those three categories, rather beautifully at that. You can run and have it track your pace, route, and heart rate. Or you can take several modest walks a day and trust that it's keeping tabs on whether you walked more or less than on other days. More importantly, it's reliable and easy to use. When compared with other trackers on the market, it clearly rises to the top and sits alongside an elite few. The Fitbit Surge is a PCMag Editors' Choice activity tracker, alongside the [Basis Peak](#) and [Mio Fuse](#) ([\\$98.00 at Amazon](#)) . All three have their sweet spots to suit different kinds of consumers.

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Design and Specs

The Fitbit Surge comes in three sizes: small (for wrist sizes 5.5 to 6.7 inches), large (6.3 to 7.9 inches), and x-large (7.6 to 9.1 inches; x-large only available at [Fitbit.com](#)). The test unit I received was black, though you can also choose blue or tangerine.

SIMILAR PRODUCTS





PC EDITORS' CHOICE ●●●●● 4.5 Outstanding

Mio Fuse

\$98.00 at Amazon

[See It](#)

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Basis Peak

[Read Our Basis Peak Review](#)



●●●●○ 4.0 Excellent

Garmin Vivosmart

[Read Our Garmin Vivosmart Review](#)

The elastomer polymer strap is 1.34 inches at its widest point, and a stainless steel buckle fastens the band elegantly and securely. Unlike the Fitbit Flex, no part of this band detaches, so there are no small parts to lose.



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On the rear side is the charging connection point as well as the optical heart rate monitor, which looks like two glowing green lights with a tiny sensor between them.

The monochrome LCD screen, which has backlighting, measures 0.82 by 0.96 inches. Three buttons, one on the left and two on the right, line the edges. I like having buttons on sport and activity-tracking watches because touch screens can't read input when you're wearing gloves. With the Fitbit Surge, there are times when you must use the touch screen, though I found it more reliably recognized my finger than the Mio Fuse, which has a touch capacitive display (it's not a screen, per se). The Fuse's heart rate monitor sometimes gets stuck either on or off for me, because I can't always get my input to register on the first try. The Surge's touch input works smoothly, though.

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I like the design, but the watch is still a little chunkier than the measurements reveal. The watch is stiff and not bendable for a good stretch both above and below the screen. So in terms of wearing it on your wrist, you have to think of the watch as being more like 2.5 inches long. That's just about the full length of my big-boned wrists, so if you're more petite, the Surge might look like a monster.

Customizations and Battery Life

You can customize the watch to add up to seven activities, in addition to running, that you can choose from when you work out. By default, they are hiking, weights, elliptical, Spinning, yoga, and a generic workout. The other choices are stair climbing, circuit training, boot camp, Pilates, kick boxing, tennis, martial arts, golf, and walking. In the running options, you can choose from free run, treadmill run, and lap run.

You can also customize the home screen of the watch, though I like the default screen best, which shows the time in digits and a dial of dots that fills in around it as the minutes tick by. The dots turn to little sunbursts at the times when you were active. For example, if the time is 9:50 and you took a short walk from 9:30 to 9:45, the dots would be almost a full circle, stopping at the 10 o'clock position, and you'd see extra dots that look like rays between the 6 o'clock and 9 o'clock positions.

Without GPS enabled (standard mode), the Surge's expected battery life is five days, and that's with the continuous heart rate monitor running. With GPS on, which is only when you're tracking an outdoor activity like running, the battery life is about five hours. That's decent, but other GPS runner's watches get 8 to 12 hours, though they don't typically have built-in heart rate monitors running at the same time.

A USB charger comes included with the device, but it's unique to the Surge, meaning if you live in a multi-Fitbit household, you can't borrow someone else's charger. What a needlessly annoying bummer.

One more item in the box when you buy a Surge is a Fitbit USB dongle, and it's one of my favorite aspects of Fitbits. If you set up your Fitbit account via computer, you can leave this tiny USB key connected, and any time you're within a few feet of your computer, your activity data will wirelessly sync to your account. That's so much more convenient and power efficient than relying on mobile device syncing alone. However, if you prefer to only use the mobile app, that's fine, too.

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Setup, First Impressions, and Heart Rate

Setup and First Impressions

Setting up a Fitbit Surge is as simple as it is with any other Fitbit device. With either a mobile app or a computer, you install the Fitbit app, either create an account or log into an existing one, and follow on-screen prompts to enable syncing. It's ridiculously straightforward.

If you're setting up a Surge to replace an old Fitbit tracker, you have to disassociate the old device first, though it's equally simple. In the mobile app (for Android and iOS), you can see in the home screen that your setup was successful if you see a Surge listed at the very top of the page.

The watch has clean lines and a minimal look, with a flat screen that's flush with the band. But it's still sporty in an understated way and more masculine than feminine. It stands out more than the subtle Withings Activité (\$89.95 at Amazon) or Activité Pop (\$93.95 at Amazon) . (I like the look of the Pop quite a bit, but it doesn't excel as a fitness tracker.)

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One minor problem I encountered has to do with the touch screen. Often, I'll glance at the watch to check the time, but instead see my stairs climbed data or steps. The screen doesn't stay on the home screen, probably a result of the touch screen being very responsive. I wish it locked into place a little better.

I've used Fitbit products since they first hit the market, and the Surge is by far the most advanced. There are more tutorial screens and suggestions for guidance than any other product by far. That's helpful. There's a lot to explore in the Surge, and some of it you won't notice straight away. For example, your heart rate data will be empty until you've worn the Surge for a few hours at least. The device and app track your heart rate all day long, and report your resting heart rate.

Heart Rate

The optical heart rate monitor is continuous, though you can turn it off from the settings to preserve battery life. The readings looked accurate enough to me both at rest and during activity, based on what I know about my heart rate, readings from other devices, and the number I get from the two-fingers-to-the-jugular test.

You can see your current heart rate right on the device by swiping the screen. If you continue to swipe, you'll see other core data that the Fitbit Surge collects, such as steps, distance, stairs, and calories burned.



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I've noticed a blip of incorrect heart rate on the Surge here and there, usually when the watch slides down my wrist and is too loose for a few moments. When I readjust it, though, the readings go back to expected values very quickly.



After you've worn the device for a bit, you can see a graph of your heart rate throughout the day, and during specific exercises. The heart rate graph shows zones, too, letting you know when you were merely burning fat versus getting a cardio workout. You can't see as much fine detail as you can in the MyBasis app for Basis Peak, which also records continuous, all-day heart rate. In the MyBasis Web app, you can mouse over any point in the day to see the time, your heart rate at the moment, as well as your skin temperature and a few other data points. I also love that with the Basis Peak, you can see your heart rate overnight and know when you were in light, deep, and REM sleep. With the Surge, you can see only light and deep sleep, and you can't see your sleeping heart rate. I do get a sick joy from looking through the Basis data and finding my heart rate hitting in the low 30s while I'm snoozing.

Activities and GPS

From the app, you can customize and pre-program a few activities to be at your fingertips the next time you workout. For example, by keeping yoga in your customized list of activities, you can select it right from the watch before you start doing sun salutations. Although these specific workouts are right in the Surge itself, using them is not really much different from recording an activity with the stopwatch function of another Fitbit device and assigning the specific activity in the app after the fact. Based on the activity you chose, Fitbit will adjust the estimated calorie burn to match. It's just a matter of whether you do it ahead of time or after the fact. But selecting the activity in the watch ahead of time certainly feels smarter. Plus, you won't forget to tag the right activity later.

GPS, Sleep

If you select outdoor running or hiking from the activities list, the GPS will automatically engage and stay on until you finish. That's great. The GPS signal also picked up in less than 30 seconds in my neighborhood, which is fast. If it's taking too long, you can select Quick Start and be on your way. The GPS will connect when it can.

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The Surge records distance, pace, elevation, routes, and splits—all the core data runners want. You can see your time, pace, and distance right on the main screen, though some data you won't see until you finish and pull up a summary screen. In the Fitbit app, you can turn on voice coaching, customize your heart rate zones, and more. There's really a lot to explore.



The Surge doesn't do the really high-end running stuff, like calculate cadence, ground contact time, and vertical oscillation. You'll want the \$399 Garmin Forerunner 620 for that.

More in line with the Surge and at the \$249 price point from Garmin is the Forerunner 220, which has a lot of the same functionality as the Surge, but doesn't include an optical heart rate monitor. You still need to add a chest strap. Triathletes, however, will be best served by the \$249 Garmin 310XT, which is made for running and swimming and can estimate distance and speed in the water.

The Surge, though, isn't meant to court the tri-training crowd, and the running features it does offer are solid. When you finish a run, you can see your mapped route in the Fitbit Web and mobile app. My test runs were all accurately mapped and showed the same mileage as what I got using Google Maps to calculate it.

While you're on the pavement, you can use the Surge to control your music, too, and get notifications of incoming text messages and calls. Or you can leave your phone at home and run just with the watch, which will save your data until you sync.

The notifications are useful, but rudimentary. They turn on when you connect your Surge to a smartphone, and you can turn them on and off from the Account Settings in the app. Any time a phone call comes in, the Surge vibrates and you can see the name of the person calling on your wrist. For text messages, the Surge vibrates, an icon appears on the screen, and you can select it by pressing the adjacent button to read the full message on the watch.

My favorite fitness tracker with smart notifications to date is the Garmin Vivosmart, an unassuming and sleek black band that shows you *all* notifications you have enabled on your iOS or Android device. You can read full text messages, just as you can with the Surge, but also see notifications from any app, which Surge can't do. Garmin Vivosmart is by no means a runner's watch, sticking to basic activity tracking instead. But for notifications, it offers much more than anything from Fitbit.

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Sleep

Fitbit trackers in general do a remarkably good job at estimating your sleep cycles, and the Surge is no exception. You can put the band into sleep mode manually if you want to, but if you fall asleep



while wearing it, tracking is automatic. That automation really helps make sleep tracking more useful.

Typically I've found my Fitbit sleep graphs to reflect the actual times I fall asleep and wake up. On one occasion, it was off by about two hours. But while I was flipping through my data and trying to suss out what happened, some new information must have synced, and the data corrected itself. That was pretty neat.

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But if the Surge ever says you went to bed two hours later than you really did, correcting it is as simple as logging into the app and navigating to the sleep area. You can manually change the bedtime and wake time. I love having that kind of control.

The Fitbit app doesn't show you as detailed sleep reports at the Basis Peak and the companion MyBasis app do. Basis estimates light, deep, and REM sleep. If you need really rich sleep reports, Fitbit won't provide them.

The Best From Fitbit Yet

The Surge is a wonderful activity tracker that elevates the Fitbit brand a tremendous degree. For the first time, it offers runners and other exercise enthusiasts the more advanced functionality they expect from a GPS watch. Because it's in the Fitbit family, Surge users get all the benefits that come with the best fitness-tracking app on the market, such as a supportive community and integration with dozens of other apps and services.

If you're trying to increase your exercise regimen and are considering other Fitbit products, I recommend the Surge over the Fitbit Charge and Charge HR. On the other hand, if you're not about to start running and hiking any time soon, save yourself some cash by sticking with the Charge.

Like I said, it's not perfect. The Surge isn't the watch for you if you're hoping to PR in your next marathon, are training for a tri, want to track bicycling effortlessly, or need a heart rate monitor that can coach you through interval training. It's not suited for those use cases. Its trade-offs seem to be in the name of simplicity and price, but I think they're well managed. All-around, the Fitbit Surge has the broadest appeal of all our Editors' Choice fitness trackers. If you've had a Fitbit product in the past and are looking to upgrade both your device and your workouts, I cannot recommend anything better.

Fitbit Surge

●●●●● 5.0 EDITORS' CHOICE



See It

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MSRP \$249.95

PROS

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CONS

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About Jill Duffy

Columnist and Deputy Managing Editor, Software





I've been contributing to PCMag since 2011, at times as an analyst and currently as deputy managing editor for the software team. My column, [Get Organized](#), has been running on PCMag since 2012. It gives advice on how to manage all the devices, apps, digital photos, email, and other technology that can make you feel like you're going to have a panic attack.

My latest book is [The Everything Guide to Remote Work](#), which goes into great detail about a subject that I've been covering as a writer and participating in personally since well before the COVID-19 pandemic.

I specialize in apps for productivity and collaboration, including project management software. I also test and analyze online learning services, particularly for learning languages.

Prior to working for PCMag, I was the managing editor of *Game Developer* magazine. I've also worked at the Association for Computing Machinery, *The Examiner* newspaper in San Francisco, and several other publications.

Follow me on [Mastodon](#). I'm currently on hiatus from Twitter [@jilleduffy](#), but maybe I'll be back. Who knows?

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