

Getting Fitbit

David M. Ewalt Former Contributor 

I focus on the intersection of games and technology.

Jun 11, 2010, 02:37pm EDT

Updated Jul 11, 2012, 06:02pm EDT

 This article is more than 10 years old.

Some people thrive on data, and like to measure, quantify, classify and graph. For obvious reasons, these people tend to gravitate toward fields like programming and engineering--fields that require a lot of sitting in front of a computer and not getting much exercise.

In other words, there's a lot of fat nerds out there. Fortunately, there's also the Fitbit.

Last fall, San Francisco-based startup Fitbit launched its namesake product, the Fitbit Tracker. It's a small plastic gizmo containing a 3-D motion sensor, something like what's inside a Nintendo Wii controller. Clip it onto your clothing, and it logs your movements throughout the day.

It may sound like just a fancy (and at \$99, expensive) pedometer. But the high-tech Fitbit is much more. Because it follows your movements in three dimensions, it doesn't just count steps--it knows how much you've been exerting yourself, if you've been sitting, walking or running. It also knows when you did what, so it can tell the difference between someone who is constantly on his

feet, vs. an otherwise sedentary person who takes one long walk at the end of the day.

Fitbit even wants to track you when you're not moving at all. Strap the gadget into the included wrist band and wear it while you sleep; the tracker can tell when you wake up, or toss and turn, providing insight into the quality of your rest.

Better yet, the Fitbit comes with a base station that plugs into your computer, and communicates wirelessly with the tracker. So all the information about your day's activities is automatically and seamlessly uploaded to Fitbit's secure servers, allowing you to log on to their Web site and view all kinds of graphs, data and details about your active habits. Fitbit also allows users to log their meals into the Fitbit Dashboard Web portal, so the result is a robust, one-stop control center to keep track of your diet, fitness and health.

I've been using the Fitbit for several months now, and I'm impressed. It's made me much more aware of how active I am over the course of a day, and helped me get up out of my chair more often and for longer periods. Dare I say it? It's made me healthier.

Fitness experts say you should take at least 10,000 steps in a given day. Most of us don't come even close to that. But the best thing about the Fitbit is being able to know exactly how close you came to a goal--and to turn achieving it into something of a game. I have definitely found myself walking more, skipping subway stops or taking an extra loop around the block, just because I knew it would add to my daily total, and perhaps put me over the 10,000 step mark.

The ability to track your diet alongside your exercise is also particularly useful. If you're trying to lose weight, it's helpful to know how many calories you've taken in and how many you've

expended; the Fitbit Dashboard does an excellent job showing if you're under or over your goals.

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Before using the device, my biggest worry was about losing it--it's basically a plastic clothespin, and I was afraid it would pop off my clothing and be gone forever. But I soon found that the tracker works perfectly well if you drop it in a pocket. It fits perfectly in the coin pocket on a pair of jeans. (Female users also report great success clipping it to their brassieres.) I've only dropped the tracker on three different occasions, when I had it clipped to a pocket, not in it, and each time I was wearing the same heavy jacket that happened to rub right against the device. Realistically, you're no more likely to lose the tracker than you are your wallet.

I'd been particularly looking forward to using the Fitbit to track my sleep--and that feature did turn out to be very cool. It's interesting to look at a graph of how much you toss and turn at night. But after the first couple weeks I stopped using it. The results were basically the same every night, so there's not much need to keep watching.

There are a few things about the Fitbit that need improving. The Fitbit Web Dashboard is still a little wonky, and the pre-selected array of foods and activities is way too short. Most of the things you eat have to be entered in by hand, which adds time, and makes you

less likely to use the feature. If Fitbit radically expanded their list of default foods, it would be far more useful.

Fitbit also desperately needs a set of mobile applications, particularly running on Apple's iPhone and Google's Android OS. If I'm meant to log whatever I eat into the system, I need a good way to do so right when I'm eating, not hours later when I'm at a computer. I found, over time, that I completely stopped logging my meals, in part because there was no easy way to do so when I'm on the move. Fitbit says they're working on an iPhone application: it can't come soon enough. Other users agree, and there are hundreds of requests for applications on the product's message boards.

At the moment, the Fitbit is an impressive product. When the company beefs up its website and launches decent mobile apps, it could become exceptional. If you're looking to get in better shape--or just to get better visibility into your daily habits--it's worth your consideration.

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David M. Ewalt

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