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Samsung Gear Fit review: Curved-screen fitness smartwatch one step short

The best of a fitness band and smartwatch, or a compromise? Samsung's ambitious Gear Fit isn't great enough to be the killer device yet, but it's trying.

Scott Stein
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17 min read

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Somewhere in my first few days of using the Gear Fit, I stared at the band on my wrist. Curved display, eye-popping colors. A notification was on my wrist: someone liked my last tweet. My sister posted new photos on Facebook. I pressed the heart rate monitor button, and noticed my heart was beating a little faster than it should.

6.9

Samsung Gear Fit

THE GOOD

The Gear Fit has a forward-looking design, many more extras than the average fitness band, and the ability to measure heart rate. Its curved AMOLED display looks fantastic, too.

THE BAD

The long display means text reads awkwardly on your wrist. The Fit only works with certain Samsung phones. Can't load apps, so you're stuck with the features included. And the price is high, so much so that you might consider a cheaper alternative or the same-priced, more full-featured Gear

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Neo.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Samsung Gear Fit is a great-looking wearable, but doesn't successfully reconcile its dual roles as activity tracker and smartwatch.

$150 at Amazon

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I pressed the button again. Suddenly a message popped up: I had three new Twitter notifications. I opened one up to read, but the Fit's perpendicular band-design made it hard to turn and look at. I sideways-scrolled, then tried checking an email. After a few weeks, even with newer software features that added a way to vertically flip the display, it never got all that much better.

Samsung Gear Fit, up close (photos)

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Is the Gear Fit doing everything I'd dreamed of? And is it even doing a great job as a watch?

The future of wearable tech has come to this: a pile of fitness bands, and a growing pile of smartwatches. But none of them all that useful, despite their attempts to be. Can something in the middle offer the best of both worlds, and be a fitness band plus a smart watch all in one?

The Gear Fit is close. And yet it's also farther than I'd thought. It does a lot of things, but it's not particularly great at any one of them.

With the latest firmware update, which adds sleep tracking, a vertical orientation mode, and more watch face customization, the Fit is a bit better as a watch. But it's still not a fantastic smartwatch, and it's definitely not the fitness band it should be. That elongated display, no matter what orientation it's in, isn't as useful as a more standard rectangular screen. But most importantly, the Fit lacks the automatic

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smarts and next-level software you'd expect from a gadget this forward-looking. It's a step forward from last year, but not enough of a leap.

Editors' note, April 15, 2014:*This review has been updated with my experience using Samsung's latest software since it updated the Gear Fit firmware and S Health software.*

Sarah Tew/CNET

Fit: Everyday wearable, or Gear Lite?

The Galaxy Gear , Samsung's vision of wearables in 2013, has been shelved in favor of a brand-new line of Gear wearables. The Galaxy name is gone completely -- as is its underlying Android OS, now replaced with upstart Tizen -- and there are three products to choose from: Gear Fit, Gear 2 , and Gear 2 Neo . The Gear 2 is the true smartwatch successor to the Galaxy Gear, and the Neo is its entry-level sibling. But the Gear Fit is a new type of device, a hybrid of fitness band and smartwatch. The Fit doesn't have its own apps, unlike last year's Galaxy Gear and this year's Gear 2 and Neo: instead, it has an extended set of on-board smart features. It's most of a smart watch.

In theory, it sounds like the perfect "chocolate and peanut butter" mixture I've always wanted in wrist tech: Get a fitness tracker and a real smartwatch onto one band, and suddenly all my needs were met. In practice, perfection remains elusive: Consider the Gear Fit a pared-down smartwatch that also tracks steps and heart rate, or consider it a fitness band with extras. That's a formula that should be magic...if the execution, and the software, can make it all work. And, if the fitness and watch elements can keep separate enough to not annoy.

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Sarah Tew/CNET

The fit of Fit: forward-looking but quirky

The functional ambivalence spills over into the Gear Fit's design -- it's trying to have it both ways. It has a curved AMOLED main body that screams future, with gleaming chrome touches and a crisp touch interface. In fact, the Fit is a little oblong puck -- the unit snaps into an included plastic band that wraps around the edges.

Across that curved glass display, you can swipe and touch to your heart's content. It feels as crisp and responsive as a phone, and looks as brilliant as the display on last year's Gear. This is the first curved display on a device seen since the Samsung Galaxy Round and LG Flex, and the first on a wearable. It's the sort of eye-opening design touch that wearables need.

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The stretched-out display design makes reading the horizontal text a little challenging if you have long text messages, but the Fit can switch views between "horizontal" and "vertical," flipping the display as needed. Vertical view creates some funky watch layouts and works better tucked under a shirt sleeve, but text is still an odd fit for the display size.

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The colors pop on the bright OLED display, but sometimes too much: the wild colors sometimes contrasted with the text I was trying to read. I came to prefer basic black and crisp white text. The OLED screen looks OK in daylight, but the curved display ended up throwing a fair amount of glare.

Sarah Tew/CNET

Under that curved glass and a chromed border, the rest of the Fit's base unit is plain black plastic. It lies flat against your wrist, snugly when the Fit's wristband is adjusted snugly. I'd advise a tighter fit, because the heart rate monitor, located on the unit's backside, needs to make contact with the skin in order to work.

The rubberized plastic band holds the Fit's body in place, but it feels kind of cheap. And while the Fit felt snug and comfy on my wrist, I did end up having mine pop off in the first day of use; I'd be worried about it happening again.

You can choose among three band colors when purchasing: black, orange, and grey. I tried the black and orange bands; Samsung says the bands will be available separately as well, but it hasn't specified pricing. My wife thought the whole band looked weirdly overly colorful, especially compared to the much more austere Fitbit Force (now discontinued) or Pebble Steel.

The Gear Fit is IP67 dust and water resistant, but it's not intended for swimming. I wore it when I washed my hands, but took it off when giving my son a bath. I did wear it when showering, eventually.

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Scott Stein/CNET

Gear Fit as fitness band

The existing crop of fitness bands work well as step-counters, but they lack a "next step" level of encouragement. I know I walk 10,000 steps a day, but what about active exercise? My own doctor reminds me to do exercise that keeps my heart rate up. Last year's fitness bands like the Nike+ Fuelband and Fitbit Force only track steps. The Gear Fit can track steps, but it also has a heart-rate monitor, too, like some recent wearables such as the Basis Band or even the Withings Pulse .

The Fit does it at the press of a button when on the Heart Rate screen, but it takes a few seconds to complete. The green LED technology is on the back of the band. I needed to stand relatively still to get the reading, and the monitor seemed to work better with the Fit flipped around so its display was on the underside of my wrist -- maybe it was my hairy arms, but I didn't always get a smooth reading.

Sarah Tew

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That's a better way to wear the Fit, by the way, because it's easier to check your step/heart rate status while exercising, and to read messages on the go. Was the Fit intended to be worn this way? It's hard to tell.

Heart rate data is checked continuously in exercise mode. The Fit has four different modes you can trigger: walking, running, cycling, and hiking. All of them allow you to set goals of time, distance, or estimated calories burned, and you can show your heart rate right alongside the timer readout. Running also has a coaching mode that bases its suggestions on your heart rate, telling you to speed up or slow down. Deeper heart rate settings will let you enter a maximum heart rate to target coaching around.

I tried working out with a Fit, and it was a pretty mixed-bag experience. For cycling, forget about stationary bikes: oddly, cycling mode requires a GPS ping and aims to track actual travel as a measure of activity, so I couldn't even start it up in my GPS-signal-free gym. Running mode is the most interesting: The Gear Fit indeed told me to speed up, slow down or keep my pace based on my heart rate, with little vibrating pings.

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But, the coaching mode didn't seem to care about how much I was actually running: it's all about my heart rate. I was sitting down, my heart rate was high, and the Fit told me to "keep my current pace." Also, heart rate accuracy seemed mixed. Early on, the measurement I was getting on my wrist was vastly different than what my treadmill's monitor was telling me (70 bpm vs. 140). After 20 minutes, the two matched each other pretty evenly: the Fit would say 140 bpm, while the treadmill would say maybe 137.

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Being able to quickly scan my heart rate while running is a plus, but the Fit's display turns off after a few seconds, and I had to keep hunting for and pressing the small button on the side. The Fit's supposed to automatically turn on with the flick of a wrist, but I was never able to get it to work more than half the time.

Then, there are all the distracting notifications. I'd get incoming call buzzes, Facebook updates, Twitter pings and more, all buzzing my wrist and getting in the way of my workout display. I couldn't tell whether a buzz meant I needed to speed up or slow down, or whether someone liked my earlier tweet about "Game of Thrones." For all the features the Fit has, it lacks any on-device way to turn notifications on or off, or even to enter a "workout mode" where I'd remain unbothered if I wanted to. Seems like a big oversight.

As a pedometer, the Fit tracks your steps and can show them continuously in one of the available watch faces. A little badge shows your progress towards 10,000 steps (or whatever goal you enter via the Gear Fit Manager app), and turns gold when you achieve it. But you have to remember to activate the pedometer: it actually turned off sometimes, and failed to track any of my steps. Other fitness bands are always automatically tracking, no matter what you do.

When you're not using the Fit in one of the exercise modes, it only does stationary heart-rate monitoring. Even when I moved a little bit, the Fit usually advised me to keep still. Knowing my stationary heart rate is no different than what I can already do on a Withings Pulse, or even on the Samsung Galaxy S5.

The Samsung Galaxy S5 has its own heart rate monitor. And a pedometer, too. So why buy the Gear Fit? The Fit allows continuous tracking in exercise mode, something the S5 can't do. The Fit will also work as an offline device, and be worn in ways you wouldn't use your phone. But, it'll give a lot of people pause that the phone and the Gear Fit, technically an accessory, both cost the same.

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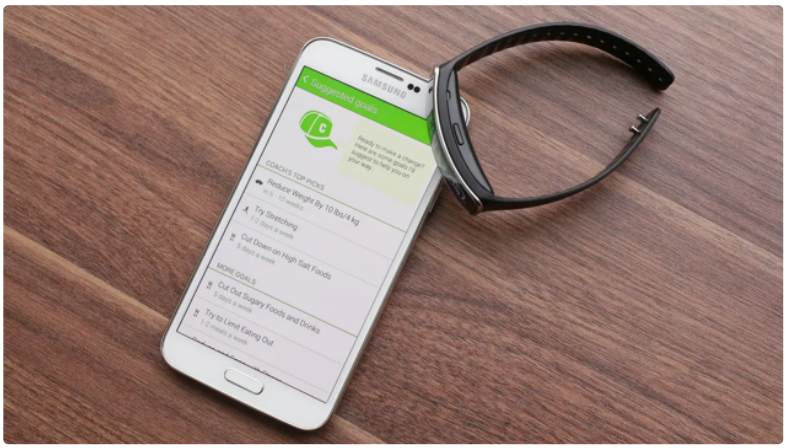
Coming up with new ways to motivate and fine-tune an exercise session is, frankly, what wearable tech should be used for. The Gear Fit uses heart rate data along with the pedometer, which is one more bit of info than the accelerometer-based pedometer in most everyday fitness bands, which is an important next step. But it's nowhere near the Basis Band or the Jawbone Up in terms of tracking and recommending ways to fine-tune your lifestyle. Part of that is the S Health app, which isn't that clear or easy to use.

A software update that hit shortly before the Gear Fit's launch adds sleep tracking, a feature already on many other fitness bands. On the Fit, you need to start a sleep session by deliberately tapping the Sleep Tracking icon and tapping again once you're in the sub-menu. When you wake up, you need to stop the session again. I tried it a few times, but I kept forgetting to start or end my sessions. And Samsung's S Health app doesn't clearly explain what your sleep data means, or even have a hub for analyzing it. Other bands, like the Misfit Shine and Jawbone, do a far better job by comparison.



Sarah Tew/CNET

Syncing with S Health is still a problem for me, even more than two weeks later. My exercise history doesn't seem to sync to the Galaxy S5, and there are no clearly-understandable charts to make sense of your data. Pedometer and heart rate info are kept in separate sub-sections, but the oversimplified flat design makes finding what you need to access confusing. Samsung's software also does little to no parsing of your data to recommend what to do next. Heart rate measurements aren't something the average person knows what to do with, and a graph of my heart rate over time doesn't carry very much value. At least pedometers have locked onto the "10,000 steps a day" motivational goal. What's the motivation to track heart rate?

The S Health app has its own "coach" section, powered by Cigna, a health insurance company. The questions and sub-goals it encourages you to set reminded me of the questions I check off at my workplace health insurance questionnaire, which gets me a small discount on my premium -- lose weight, be active a few times a week, be less

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stressed. These goals don't seem to translate into anything at all that you can do with the Gear Fit. I need S Health to be a clear-cut tool for using the Gear Fit.

Samsung's software is quick to point out that health data is for "recreational use only," something that many of these health wearables have to mention as a disclaimer since they're not medically approved. That's how heart rate feels, in practice: more recreational than essential. It's helpful to see how winded I might be after walking, but I didn't always find it guided me to any helpful way to relax or live with that heart rate, and the S Health app didn't make things any clearer. It's data in search of a solution.

Pebble Steel, and Gear Fit.
Sarah Tew/CNET

Gear Fit as smartwatch

What if you're looking at the Fit as your new smartwatch? It's cool to look at and gets tons of notifications, but a word of warning: the Fit won't run its own apps, and the shape of its display makes for some awkward text-reading.

The Fit's unique display is also a hindrance. It looks cool, but just like Nike Fuelband, its readout runs horizontally along the band. That's weird because your wrist naturally turns to the side, and the text suddenly becomes sideways. It works on the Fuelband because its readout is large and simple. The Fit can also flip its display to vertical mode, and for some features, it solves a lot of the horizontal-band problems: the watch is easier to read, and most number-driven functions like heart rate, pedometer, and the alarms and stopwatch work great in vertical mode. They look cool, too. But, text-based notifications and emails stretch out ridiculously, fitting one or two words per line. It's no way to read an email. Horizontal mode only fits four lines at a time, with about five words per line.

On the Fit, there are plenty of more complex settings, notifications, and other things to read, requiring many taps and swipes. I prefer wearing the Fit in vertical mode for everyday watch use, but it's not great for

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text. You'd better get used to living with reading on a stretched-out screen, twisting your neck or arm around, or wearing the Fit on the underside of your wrist (not a bad way to go when exercising).

The display, like most phones or color screens, turns off after a while, unlike the Pebble, which stays on. The Gear Fit has sensors that turn the screen on when you turn your wrist to look at the time, but in practice it wouldn't always work. You can also press a small button on the Fit's top edge to bring up the display, or double-press to skip to a function you can assign.

Sarah Tew/CNET

Much like the Pebble and many other smartwatches, the Gear Fit can fully tap into receiving notifications. Incoming calls, texts, weather, Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, even odd ones like Google Drive and Flipboard. Basically, you can get whatever notifications routinely pop up and bother you on your phone, but on your wrist.

On a Pebble, it's a little more innocuous. The Pebble doesn't do much else other than receive notifications, and because its screen is always on, it's easier to scan. The Fit fits about four lines of text in horizontal mode when the font is set to "small" (you can also choose "medium," but barely any words fit on one screen). Then, to read the rest of the notification, an awkward top-to-bottom swipe is needed, which amounts to a sideways swipe on your wrist...it gets confusing, and makes reading and deleting notifications hard to pull off. At least notifications get stored for later, and categorized by app. But after a while, wouldn't you just check your phone instead?

The Gear Fit doesn't just monitor incoming phone calls: it can also send quick responses, too. You can choose to send a message or end a call, and add a "do not disturb" style canned message that you can customize on the Gear Fit Manager app on your Samsung phone.

You can also control music via a built-in remote for phone-based music, which also adjusts volume, and shows the track listing underneath the controls. It's a common feature among wearables, but

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it's nice to have on a fitness band. Keep in mind that the Gear 2 and Gear 2 Neo will store music, too. There's also a stopwatch, a timer, and a "find my device" link, all of which aren't built-in features on the Pebble watch, but should be.

It's not a very complex set of extras, and the Fit can't install any other apps, unlike the Pebble and Gear. But, some pre-installed customizable wallpapers and watch faces mix the look up a little. One watch face adds pedometer step info, plus a daily 10,000-step goal counter. Another adds weather data pushed from your Samsung phone. The latest Gear Fit software adds other cool watch faces, plus the ability to customize a watch design with a custom wallpaper. I imported a photo of my son, but it ended up cropped to support the stretched display.

Sarah Tew/CNET

Leashed to Samsung

The Gear Fit suffers greatest because of the same limitation the Galaxy Gear had: it only works with certain Samsung phones and tablets: Samsung Galaxy S5, Galaxy Grand 2, Galaxy Note 3, Galaxy Note 3 Neo, Galaxy Note 2, Galaxy S4, Galaxy S3. Galaxy S4 Zoom, Galaxy S4 Active, Galaxy S4 mini, Galaxy Mega 6.3, Galaxy Mega 5.8, Galaxy Note 10.1 (2014 Edition), Galaxy NotePRO (12.2), and Galaxy TabPRO (12.2/10.1/8.4). That's a lot more device support than the Galaxy Gear had at launch -- it only worked the Note 3 at first -- but it still means that the Gear Fit is, for now, a Samsung device-specific accessory. I tested the Gear Fit with a Samsung Galaxy S5 running the newest version of S Health.

There's also the band's dependence on Samsung's health app: your health data is tied to Samsung's S Health app. The S Health app can support third-party app integration, and the app's been upgraded to accept heart rate data and sleep tracking. But so far, it's still not as robust-feeling as competing health apps tied to fitness-specific bands. Also, so far, the Fit-to-S Health syncing process had a few hiccups with the prerelease software I tried: it's hard to find your previous data. Most of all, S Health just seems bare-bones to me, and closed-off

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compared to more social or universal apps like those from Fitbit, Jawbone, Withings, or even Nike+, That will be a factor if you're considering this as a fitness band. An upcoming software update might help, but what probably won't change is this: the Samsung health experience doesn't seem focused on helping you make sense of all the random numbers. My mom would be lost trying to use S Health to get fit. S Health can work with a few existing fitness apps, including Runkeeper, but these features don't run on Gear Fit -- unlike the Pebble, which can mirror some fitness apps on its display.

The Gear Fit's main settings are managed via the Gear Fit Manager app, which allows you to tweak sync settings with S Health, do all the exercise-goal, watch customization and other settings you can also adjust on the Gear Fit, and select which phone notifications get pushed to the Fit. There's also the option to have a more limited set of notifications, and let your phone act as the main hub for the rest of your information, much like the original Galaxy Gear did.

Sarah Tew/CNET

Battery life

The Gear Fit lasted a few days on a single charge, while I used it track steps, frequently measure my heart rate, and forward notifications. Expect maybe two comfortable days of use before a recharge. I squeezed three days out of mine. That's a lot less than a Fitbit Force, Fuelband, Jawbone Up or even the Pebble Steel, which all lean toward a week of use. It's closer to what you'd expect from last year's Galaxy Gear. You could turn off Bluetooth and continuous pedometer tracking and get more battery life, but why would you be wearing a Gear Fit at all if it wasn't connected and tracking your activity?

So, keep that charger handy. The Gear Fit charges via Micro-USB, but needs an additional included snap-on dongle to accept a Micro-USB cable.

Which Gear to get (if any)

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One thing that's pretty weird about Samsung's current wearable line-up is that there are three products to choose from. The Gear 2 costs $299, but the Gear 2 Neo and Gear Fit both cost $199. The Fit is expensive compared to most fitness bands, but not by as much as you'd think: many of the premium models cost $150, making the Fit a $50 upwell.

Samsung Gear Fit, hands-on (pictures)

See all photos →

If you really want a Gear, the one to pick might be a Gear 2 Neo, which costs the same and also offers apps, and the ability to side-load music. It also has a heart-rate monitor and pedometer, but also has a more robust set of features. So that's the weird question Samsung's posed to you, the consumer: get the fuller-featured watch, or pick the Gear Fit for...style? The Fit's style doesn't seem stellar enough to give up the other features. Stay tuned for a review on the other Gears when we get them.

Then, there's another problem looming: Android Wear watches, which will offer another tempting direction for Samsung phone owners. Why pick a Gear at all?

Where next

I really wish the Gear Fit worked with more phones. If Samsung's really looking for the Fit to be an entry-level way to get used to wearables, or even to experience Samsung's newer mobile tech for the first time, the Fit should be an accessory to other Android phones, too...or even for iPhones. Most fitness bands aim to work with both iOS and Android. Limiting the Gear Fit's reach really dents how many people would even consider this device in the first place.

The Gear Fit is a radical change compared to the Samsung Galaxy Gear released just six months ago, and credit goes to Samsung for evolving so quickly. But, the Gear Fit banks on a basic proposition that simple is better, and that a smartwatch and fitness band rolled into one device is better than a smarter watch.

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I agree with that philosophy, especially if you're not ready to explore the weird and mostly useless world of on-watch apps. But the Gear Fit isn't perfectly designed to be the best fitness band or the best watch. Its odd-shaped screen, limited battery life, higher price, and need (for now) to be tied to Samsung phones add up to an intriguing but limited gadget. A recent software update shows that Samsung might be committed to making the Fit better as soon as possible, but the Fit's biggest problem isn't its hardware: it's the overextended software underneath. It's not good enough at helping you with your health, and it's not smart enough to be a truly automatic wearable band. It's a sign of what's to come, but the Gear Fit isn't good enough to ditch other, better devices. Not for me, at least.

I want a band I don't need to babysit, or frequently charge. I value that the most. That's why bands like the Pebble and Misfit Shine stay on my wrist. For now, the first Gear Fit isn't as perfect a fit as I dreamed it would be. Even if it does look cool.

6.9

Samsung Gear Fit

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