

Digital health: the new normal

UK downloads of health apps have substantially increased during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, an Organisation for the Review of Care and Health Applications (ORCHA) report shows.

Overall health app downloads rose 25% in 2020, while mental health app downloads shot up by almost 200% between summer 2019 and summer 2020. The report notes the pandemic has underscored the importance and increased the use of digital health tools and that they should continue to be used to support health care services when Covid-19 subsides. ORCHA anticipates that more structures will be put into place over 2021 to ensure long-term use of digital health solutions.

Why does this matter?

It's hardly surprising lockdown restrictions have led to a sharp increase in the use of health apps. More and more people, including health care professionals themselves, have been suffering from mental health issues related to COVID-19, which are likely to endure beyond the pandemic itself.

People have been encouraged to improve and maintain their health to reduce their risk of contracting SARS-CoV-2, the virus behind COVID-19, and the risk of severe symptoms if they do. People are also avoiding health care services – where they are still available – fearing either becoming infected or placing extra burdens on medical staff.

App stores are bursting at the seams with health apps, but not all of them are effective and it can be a minefield selecting one that's suitable. There are services, however, such as the [NHS Apps Library](#), that can make this process easier and give users confidence their apps have been reviewed by health experts.

ORCHA maintains a [similar library](#) and, as highlighted in its [report](#), its top recommended, favoured and downloaded apps during 2020 centred on mental health, healthy living – including fitness, weight loss, diabetes and blood pressure – smoking cessation and sleep. Many of these apps – such as [Couch to 5k](#) – have now become household names.

Also noted by ORCHA is that health care professionals have been increasingly using digital technologies to communicate and hold appointments with their patients. It wants this to continue, but with further embedment of digital health into services to improve patient outcomes.

This sentiment is shared by patients who are becoming more interested in accessing their [health care data](#) so they can better manage their journeys through health care systems with greater knowledge of their conditions, and with the ability to select services right for them. To achieve this, health care systems will need to adapt to using more digital solutions to connect with patients.

As digital health advances, one aspect that will need to be figured out is funding. Previously, online health services have been [run at a deficit](#) due to only receiving funds from local authorities (i.e. where the service's head office is based) despite the potential for patients to be located across the country.

Lateral thought from Curation

The pandemic has led to many people spending more time in front of a screen than ever before. This has also been creating health issues. A [UK survey](#) of 2,000 people revealed 38% believed their eyesight has got worse for this reason, while 21% said they were less likely to visit an optician as they are afraid of catching or spreading COVID-19.

Hand-in-hand with this extra screen time is the extended wear of headphones for privacy and to reduce distraction for other household members. The downside of this is an uptick in bacterial and fungal [ear infections](#) being reported to doctors.

Unfortunately, with the advance of health apps, seeking information and care for eye and ear problems caused by too much screen time will mean having to use a screen to find it.

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