RESEARCH LETTER

Self-regulated use of a wearable activity sensor is not associated with improvements in physical activity, cardiometabolic risk or subjective health status

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity (PA) trackers are a pervasive feature of modern life. It is expected that by 2020, sales of wearable devices will reach approximately 300 million users many with the intention of increasing activity by tracking daily step count and other measures of PA. We assessed whether self-regulated use of a commercial PA tracker without prescribed goals improved (1) PA, (2) cardiometabolic (CM) risk factors or (3) subjective health status (SHS).

METHODS

We recruited 431 healthy, mostly white (59%) male (61%) volunteers aged 41±9 years (mean±SD), body mass index (BMI) 28±6 kg/m² (23.6% obese) from a common worksite in North America to wear a commercial PA tracker for 6 months. Behaviour and PA change goals were not prescribed. Participants did not receive any compensation but kept the PA tracker at study completion. The wrist-worn PA tracker (Basis Peak) incorporated standard technology including an optical sensor and 3-axes accelerometer and was synchronised to participants’ mobile devices enabling them to follow their PA. Raw accelerometer data from the PA tracker was collected and compiled by the research team for analysis. We defined sufficient data as a minimum of 70 days of wear time with a minimum of 10 waking hours per day as in prior studies.

ΔPA was analysed using weighted least squares regression. Changes in BMI, CM risk factors and SHS were assessed via generalised estimating equations. All models were adjusted for age, gender and BMI where appropriate.

RESULTS

Over 5.0±0.6 months, 322 (75%) participants completed the study with sufficient PA data. There were no differences between subjects with and without sufficient data with regard to age, gender, BMI or CM outcomes. There was a downward trend of mean hourly steps per day during the study even though 57% of patients perceived their PA to have increased (figure 1A). ΔPA did not differ in those reporting increased PA versus those who did not (−0.27±0.79 vs −0.34±0.74, P=0.68) (figure 1B). Aside from an increase in systolic BP, CM risk factors were unchanged (figure 1C). Physical (54.3±6.6 to 54.5±5.7, P=0.56) and mental (50.7±8.4 to 51.0±8.2, P=0.47) component scores for SHS were also unchanged. Results were consistent after adjusting for ethnicity.

DISCUSSION

Self-regulated use of a commercial PA tracker was not associated with improved PA, CM risk factors or SHS in office-based employees. Importantly, 57% felt their PA had increased despite an objective decline in steps. Our findings extend prior research that challenges the clinical utility of commercial PA trackers over conventional PA promotion and weight loss interventions. Study termination in the winter months may have contributed to higher systolic BP. As shown in figure 1A, the downward trend in step count was
consistent across the study duration from July to December suggesting seasonal variation had minimal impact on declining PA. We alert scientists and policy makers to possible false perception of increased PA despite declining step count.

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Acknowledgements We would like to thank Western Institutional Review Board for considering and approving our study. We thank Prashant Shah, SC, Douglas Bogia and Carla Sassano (Intel Corporation) for their assistance with participant recruitment, data collection and review. Contributors LJF had full access to all the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. SST, MN, JL, NFF, JC, AN contributed substantially in the study design or data acquisition and analyses, drafting the manuscript for intellectual consent and approving the final version. All authors take accountability for the integrity of this work.

Funding SST is supported by HL-F32HL131308. The research was funded by Intel Corporation.

Disclaimer The findings and conclusions of this study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Intel Corporation, OHSU or the NHLBI.

Competing interests AN is an employee of Intel Corporation. No conflicts of interest otherwise noted.

Ethics approval Western Institutional Review Board.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data sharing statement This research is covered by a data sharing agreement between Oregon Health Science University and Intel Corporation.

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To cite Thosar SS, Niederhausen M, Lapidus J, et al. Br J Sports Med Published Online First: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2017-098512

Accepted 27 November 2017
doi:10.1136/bjsports-2017-098512

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