

Apple's reason to buy its latest watch is timed to your health

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Apple CEO Tim Cook discusses the new Apple Watch 4 at the Steve Jobs Theater during an event to announce new products September 12, 2018, in Cupertino, California. Photo: Marcio Jose Sanche/AP

Apple is trying to transform its smartwatch. The California-based company wants to change the watch into a tool for better health by slowly evolving it into a medical device.

The fourth version of the Apple Watch, called Series 4, will be released in late September. The Apple Watch will add features that allow it to take high-quality heart readings and detect when the wearer falls. It is part of Apple's long-in-the-making strategy to give people a distinct reason to buy the watch. Right now, it mostly does things smartphones already do.

Since the Apple Watch was launched in April 2015, most people have not figured out why they need to buy one. Apple does not release sales figures, but estimates suggest the company shipped roughly 18 million watches in 2017. For comparison, Apple sold 216 million iPhones last year. That's almost 12 times as many.

Worldwide, about 48 million smartwatches are expected to be sold this year. It is estimated that nearly 1.9 billion phones will be sold, according to the research company Gartner.

Apple Watch Zeros In On Health

Tim Cook, the CEO who leads Apple, has long emphasized the watch's health and fitness-tracking capabilities. The original version featured a heart-rate sensor that fed data into fitness and workout apps. It allowed the apps to suggest new goals and offer digital rewards for fitness accomplishments.

Two years later, Apple called its watch "the ultimate device for a healthy life." Apple emphasized water resistance for swimmers and built-in GPS for tracking runs or cycling workouts. In February, the company announced that the watch would track skiing and snowboarding runs. The device could track both speed and steepness.

The latest version, revealed on September 12, is even more focused on health. It now takes electrocardiograms, or EKGs, which measure the electrical activity of the heart. EKGs can help detect heart problems. The watch will also monitor for irregular heartbeats and can detect when the wearer has fallen, the company said.

EKGs are important tests of heart health and typically require a visit to the doctor. The feature was praised onstage by Ivor Benjamin, a heart doctor who is president of the American Heart Association. He said such real-time data would change the way doctors work.

Straight From The Heart

Tuong Nguyen works for Gartner. His job is to study data about how different companies do business. He said the feature could turn smartwatches into a more practical everyday product. Right now, they are more of a luxury, he said.

It could also lead some health insurance plans to help pay for the cost of an Apple Watch, Nguyen said. That would help to cover the \$400 starting price for a device that still requires a companion iPhone, which can now cost more than \$1,000.

Apple's watch will use new sensors on the back and on the watch dial. A new app will say whether each reading is normal or not. It will alert wearers if they show signs of atrial fibrillation. This is an irregular heart rate that increases the risk of heart complications, such as stroke and heart failure.

Apple says the heart data can be shared with doctors through a PDF file. It's not yet clear how ready doctors are to receive a possible flood of new EKG data from patients, though. It is also not clear how useful they will find the electronic files.

Weighing The Apple Watch's Benefits

Eric Topol is a heart doctor and director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in California. He warned that the EKG feature could lead to patients taking more tests than necessary. It could result in unnecessary prescriptions for blood thinners and burden doctors with calls from patients who likely do not need treatment.

He said the feature will probably save some lives and prevent strokes with early detection of heart trouble. However, the number of benefits compared with the costs might or might not be worth it, he said. It is too soon to tell.

Apple said the EKG feature will be available to U.S. customers later this year.

New Watch Will Dial 911

Fall detection could also be significant, especially for elderly users. The new Apple Watch claims to be able to tell the difference between a trip and a fall, and when a fall occurs, it will suggest calling 911. If it receives no response within a minute, the watch will automatically place an emergency call and message friends and family listed as emergency contacts.

Only certain Apple Watch models support cellular calls. Those that do not can still make emergency calls when near a paired iPhone or Wi-Fi service, though.

Apple says it monitored about 2,500 people. It measured how they fell off ladders, missed a step while walking or got their legs caught in their pants while getting dressed. It used that data to separate real falls from other heavy wrist movements, such as clapping and hammering.

The feature is available immediately worldwide and will turn on automatically for users age 65 and older. Younger people can activate it in the settings.

The new Apple Watch still lacks one feature found in rival wrist gadgets. It lacks the ability to analyze sleep quality. Also, battery life in the new watch remains at 18 hours, meaning it needs a nightly recharge.