

Are smart watches the next big thing?

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If you're like most Americans, you don't wear a wristwatch. But increasingly, electronics companies are betting you'll slap one on your wrist if it's more like a smartphone than a simple timepiece.

In the past year, Sony and startup Pebble have released devices called "smart [watches](#)" because they take on some of the functions of a smartphone. In the near future, those devices will be joined by many others - including, if the rumors are true, Apple's much buzzed-about iWatch.

But just what is a smart watch and why would anyone want one?

At least as they exist today, smart watches are accessories to smartphones. Some have touch screens and run applications, but they're designed mainly to allow users to interact with or view information from their phones. Instead of having their own connection to the Internet, they connect to users' smartphones via Bluetooth.

Smart watches deliver notifications, telling users when they've received text and email messages, showing the caller ID for incoming calls and alerting users to new Facebook or Twitter post.

They also allow users to control apps on their phones. Users can answer calls and start playing their music or fast-forward to the next song by tapping buttons on their smart watch. And working with apps and sensors on the phone, they can allow users to keep track of their workouts, showing the distance run or time elapsed.

Oh, and they also tell time.

But, you might note, you can already do all of these things with your smartphone. Why would you need another device?

The answer, advocates and analysts say, is that there are times when it's easier to simply glance at a watch than to interact with your phone.

Say you're listening to music on your phone while running and want to jump to the next song. Instead of pulling out your phone, waking it up and finding the music controls - a difficult proposition while you're jogging along - you could simply press a button or two on your wristwatch. Or say you are in a meeting, but want to know if your spouse calls or messages you. Glancing at a watch might be less obtrusive or rude than constantly staring at your smartphone.

"There are folks out there that are tied to their phone; their phone is their life," said Angela McIntyre, an analyst who covers the wearable technology market for technology research firm Gartner. "Being able to have a second screen for your phone on your wrist, so you don't have to take out your smartphone and do things with it when it's inconvenient, could be useful for them."

And soon, smart watches may do a lot more. Both Sony and Pebble are encouraging software developers to make apps for their devices. Already, owners can play simple games on Sony's gadget or use it as a remote control for a smartphone's camera.

In the future, smart watches may even replace smartphones by including cellular and Wi-Fi radios. Those would allow users to make and receive calls or send messages directly through their watches without having to carry around a phone. And they could allow users to unlock the doors of their car or set their home alarm with just their watch.

"What you do on a phone now or a tablet now, ultimately, you can do most or all of those on a watch," said Marshal Cohen, who covers the watch industry as the chief retail analyst at market research firm NPD Group.

Some early adopters find smart watches useful. Cupertino, Calif., voice actor Dana Marks said he ordered a Pebble because he thought it would be less distracting and annoying to receive notifications on it than the audible dings his smartphone made.

With the Pebble, "I don't have to keep pulling my phone out of my pocket and unlocking it to see what's going on," said Marks, 67.

San Francisco resident Julie Price, a distance running coach and health game developer, said she got interested in the Pebble because of its potential as a fitness watch. Price, 39, says she now wears her Pebble all the time, whether she's running or not. One of the things she loves about it is its caller ID feature.

"I first thought that was so silly - you can't take your phone out of your pocket?" she said. "But it's really, really helpful."

Of course, not everyone is enthusiastic about smart watches or the potential demand for them. Americans largely gave up wearing wristwatches when they started using cellphones, noted NPD's Cohen. Convincing them to wear a watch again - or, for younger consumers, for the first time - may take some effort.

Their appeal is also likely to be limited because they are smartphone accessories rather than independent devices. Not everyone with a smartphone will buy or even want an extra device to carry around, analysts note.

And for now, few consumers see a real need to have one. Technology research firm IDC recently surveyed consumers, assessing their interest in various smart watch features. Not one of the features registered strong interest from more than 15 percent of consumers.

"In terms of level of interest, that's incredibly low," said Jonathan Gaw, a consumer technology analyst at IDC.

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NOT YOUR GRANDFATHER'S TIMEPIECE:

QUESTION: What is a smart watch?

ANSWER: While its functions may change in the future, for now it's a [wristwatch](#) that allows users to interact with and control their smartphones.

Q: What can you do with it?

A: Receive alerts for things like incoming text messages and emails; see the caller ID for incoming calls; control certain [smartphone](#) apps, including music players; and track workouts.

Q: Who's offering them?

A: For now, there are only a handful, notably from Sony and Pebble. But many more are expected to come on the market over the next year or so, including, potentially, models from Samsung, Google and Apple.

Q: How much do they cost?

A: Sony's SmartWatch sells for around \$90. The Pebble watch costs

\$150. Models of the MetaWatch start at \$130.

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