

Review: Samsung fitness products offer the basics

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In this Feb. 24, 2014 file photo, the new device Samsung Gear Fit is tried out at the Mobile World Congress, the world's largest mobile phone trade show in Barcelona, Spain. Samsung's latest gadgets, the Galaxy S5 smartphone, Gear Fit wristband and Gear 2 and Gear 2 Neo wristwatches, try to tap into people's passions for tracking fitness activities. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez, File)

Samsung's latest gadgets try to tap into people's passions for tracking fitness activities.

The Gear 2 and Gear 2 Neo wristwatches, Gear Fit wristband and Galaxy S5 [smartphone](#) all come with heart rate monitors and software for tracking exercise and the number of steps you walk in a given day.

In April, I ran the Big Sur International Marathon in California sporting the Gear Fit, along with a Garmin GPS watch and activity trackers from Jawbone and Withings. I used the S5 and Gear 2 on other runs and as part of day-to-day living. I wanted to see how useful and accurate these devices are and how easy they are to use.

The S5 phone sells in the U.S. for about \$200 with a two-year service contract, or about \$650 without one. The Gear 2 costs about \$300, while Gear Fit and Gear 2 Neo cost about \$200 each. The wrist devices must be paired with certain Samsung phones or tablets made in the past few years, though you can leave the device at home and sync the data after your workout.

Samsung is trying to become the hub for all your health information, similar to what Apple is eyeing with its upcoming HealthKit tools for iPhones and iPads. The technology is rudimentary now, but apps might one day use all this data to warn you of problems before you notice symptoms.

— Tracking heart rate.

The Jawbone Up doesn't track heart rate, while Withings' new Pulse O2 needs to be removed from the wristband for readings—impractical during exercise. Optional [heart rate monitors](#) with GPS watches typically require wearing a separate sensor.

With Samsung's products, that's all built in and easily accessible.

But I sometimes have to try several times to get a good reading,

especially with the wrist devices on my sweaty arm.

Readings are usually within several beats of the pulse I measure manually—good enough to gauge your heart rate, but no replacement for medical devices such as an EKG. Now and then, I get readings that are way off.

Samsung has free phone apps to log past readings. The wrist devices continually track your [heart rate](#) during exercise, but you see only the average and maximum rates on the app.



In this Feb. 24, 2014 file photo, the Samsung Gear 2, is demonstrated at the Mobile World Congress, the world's largest mobile phone trade show in Barcelona, Spain. Samsung's latest gadgets, the Galaxy S5 smartphone, Gear Fit wristband and Gear 2 and Gear 2 Neo wristwatches, try to tap into people's passions for tracking fitness activities. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez, File)

— Tracking exercise.

Dedicated activity trackers such as Jawbone's and Withings' automatically detect when you're exercising. By contrast, you must tell the Samsung device when you're starting or finishing. The exception is with the pedometer, which counts daily steps.

Some people will prefer having everything automated, but I like Samsung's approach, as it offers more precision than guessing based on motion sensors. It's similar to how GPS watches work. However, GPS watches also let you take splits—snapshots every mile in a race or every lap on a track. Samsung has just start and stop—not even pause.

Accuracy on the phone is comparable to that of other GPS phone apps. Lacking GPS, the wrist devices calculate distance based on motion sensors and your height—a reflection of how far you travel per step. Distance tends to be off by the same amount each time. There's no way to calibrate the devices, apart from lying about your height. I had to shave off about a foot to get it right.

During the Big Sur marathon, the Gear Fit had me at 26.2 miles—finished—with some six miles still to go. How demotivating.

— Tracking sleep.

The wrist devices can offer insights into your unconscious hours and tell you in the morning how much of your sleep was motionless.

I found that neat, until I saw the Jawbone and Withings apps go further. Those devices tell you how often you get up to use the bathroom, how long it takes for you to fall asleep and how long you hit the snooze button before you actually get up. They also separate light and deep sleep.



In this Feb. 24, 2014 file photo, a Samsung Galaxy S5 smartphone, left, and a Samsung Gear 2 are displayed at the Samsung Galaxy Studio, in New York. Samsung's latest gadgets, the Galaxy S5 smartphone, Gear Fit wristband and Gear 2 and Gear 2 Neo wristwatches, try to tap into people's passions for tracking fitness activities. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

— Tracking weight and nutrition.

The S Health app for the S5 lets you log what you eat by searching for a specific product (such as a Big Mac from McDonald's) or entering individual ingredients.

There's a lot of guess work, though. I have no clue what I pointed to when I ordered at the lunch counter the other day. I know rice was part of it, but what was the portion size?

Another feature logs the weight you enter over time. You need your own scale.

— A mix of the basics.

Think of these Samsung gadgets as fitness samplers. They offer a little bit of everything, without excelling at any one thing.

People who are looking for more than the basics might get frustrated. If you need to track something specific regularly—in my case, distance and pace on runs—you're better off with a device dedicated to that.

But if you're new to fitness tracking, these gadgets offer a good introduction.

They also offer a peek into a future where your various health records are integrated and presented neatly in graphs and charts. We're far from that day, but you see the first few steps here.

Although I wouldn't buy an S5 phone just for these fitness features, they could nudge you in that direction if you are already thinking about it. You get most of the functionality with just the phone, but the wrist devices are easier to carry and will also monitor your sleep.

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