

US health insurer to subsidize Apple Watch buys

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A major US health insurance company on Monday said it will help buy Apple smartwatches for customers as part of a move to integrate the gadgets into wellness management programs.

Aetna announced that, in the coming open enrollment period, it will make Apple Watch buys an option for large employers and individual customers, becoming the first major health care company to subsidize "a significant portion" of the cost of an Apple Watch.

Aetna would let people pay off the balances of Apple Watch buys using monthly payroll deduction plans if they wish.

Aetna describes itself as one of the nation's leading diversified health care benefits companies, serving an estimated 46.3 million people.

Along with the customer program, Aetna said that it planned to give each of its nearly 50,000 employees an Apple Watch if they take part in a company wellness program incorporating the internet-connected wrist wear.

"We are incredibly excited to use iPhone, iPad, and Apple Watch to create simple, intuitive and personalized technology solutions that will transform the health and wellness experience for our members," Aetna chief executive Mark Bertolini said in a release.

"This is only the beginning—we look forward to using these tools to

improve health outcomes and help more people achieve more healthy days."

Apple Watch devices synch wirelessly to iPhones.

Aetna said that, with support from Apple, it is planning health initiatives exclusively tied to the California-based companies iOS mobile operating system.

Initiatives will include health apps tailored for iPhone, iPad, and Apple Watch, according to the insurance company.

"We are thrilled that Aetna will be helping their members and employees take greater control of their health using Apple Watch," Apple chief executive Tim Cook said in the joint release.

"Aetna's new initiatives will be a powerful force toward creating better customer experiences in health care."

Features in Aetna health apps, planned for release early next year, were to include help understanding illnesses or remembering to take medicines.

Apple Wallet digital billfold would be incorporated into Aetna apps, to let people pay medical bills or prescription costs.

Apple has built features into Apple Watch, and the operating software for its mobile devices, to make them potentially powerful and personalized tools for individual health as well as broader medical research.

Global smartwatch shipments soared eight-fold—from five million units in 2014 to 40.3 million in 2015, according to estimates by Gartner

consultancy.

But the pace of growth has since slowed, with 60.4 million watches to be shipped this year and 66.3 million in 2017.

Apple released its second generation smartwatch this month, with strong emphasis on supporting healthy lifestyles.

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