

Mayo Clinic offers first aid assistance via Amazon's Alexa digital assistant

September 21 2017, by Joe Carlson, Star Tribune (Minneapolis)



Alexa, forget my grocery list and morning traffic reports. Tell me about CPR.

Alexa, Amazon's voice-activated digital assistant for the home, has learned a new skill - dispensing medical information about first aid from

one of the best-known names in medicine, Minnesota's Mayo Clinic.

The information is accessible by speaking to the Amazon device, which users might appreciate if they're busy doing something with their hands, like putting aloe on a burn or examining someone who has stopped breathing.

Users who enable the free Mayo Clinic First Aid program and then ask Alexa for information about CPR are told, multiple times, to call 911. The device also advises in its robotic-female voice to begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation for one minute and then call 911 if the person is unresponsive from suffocation. If the user asks for it, the device will go on to discuss specific techniques for doing CPR on an adult, child or baby.

"We provide health information in a print newsletter, digital newsletter, desktop web, mobile web, Mayo Clinic app. We view this voice interface, specifically the Amazon Alexa application, as basically a new channel to provide that information," said Jay Maxwell, a senior director in health information with the Mayo Clinic Global Business Solutions, which developed Mayo Clinic First Aid.

Although the program includes a disclaimer that Mayo Clinic First Aid should not be used in a life-threatening medical emergency, "instructions for CPR" is one of the suggested topics in the program's description, along with "tell me about spider bites" and "how to treat a cut."

Online mega-retailer Amazon sells a variety of hands-free home assistant devices like the Echo and the Echo Dot that can listen to human voices and respond to commands like add eggs to the grocery list, check traffic or play streaming music. Alexa is a cloud-based system that responds directly to the user, similar to Apple's Siri program.

And just as apps can be downloaded at will for smartphones, Alexa-enabled devices can add new "skills" created by outside companies like the Pizza Hut program that can order a pie for delivery, or the U.S. Bank program that can securely check balances and recent credit card purchases.

Amazon spokesman Daniel Gabis said Mayo developed its First Aid program using Amazon's self-service Alexa Skills Kit, as other organizations have.

"We're excited that Mayo Clinic developed its health information skill for Alexa customers. Other developers such as WebMD have built skills for Alexa using our self-service Alexa Skills Kit," Gabis said via email.

The WebMD Alexa program, and similar ones like DexMD, include explicit disclaimers that the programs do not provide medical advice. Mayo's First Aid program says it is for "information purposes only" and should not be used in an emergency medical situation or in place of professional medical advice. Rather, the Mayo program offers instructions for self care for "dozens of everyday mishaps and other situations."

Dr. Sandhya Pruthi, associate medical director of Mayo Clinic Global Business Solutions, said the content was adapted from entries in the medical library that Mayo already offers for free online. The information is updated in real time as medical evidence evolves.

One of the biggest challenges was adapting the information from a format where users can move their eyes around a web page to find what they want, to one in which Alexa reads all the information aloud and users have to wait to hear what they want and think of deeper questions to ask.

"It has to be conversational. You can't just read a textbook," Pruthi said. "I think it's more understandable when it's presented this way. ... The way that I talk to my patient today is the way that I would want this to come across on Amazon Alexa."

Amazon is not paying Mayo for the content, and there are no ads in the free download program. Mayo already had a relationship with Amazon, through its 60-second audio news feed for medical stories called Mayo Clinic Flash Briefing, before the launch of the First Aid program.

A spokeswoman in Mayo's public relations office acknowledged that services like the First Aid program give a boost to Mayo's brand awareness with the public, but she said the primary motivation was to continue to extend the not-for-profit Mayo Clinic's health knowledge beyond its four walls.

"The voice-enabled experience is a new and growing global innovation, and may be the largest shift in how people interact with devices since the development of smartphones," Mayo spokeswoman Duska Anastasijevic wrote in an email. "Mayo Clinic is among the first health care organizations in the voice space, and will take what it learns to apply it toward other projects that provide trusted [information](#) or potentially address a market or consumer need."

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Citation: Mayo Clinic offers first aid assistance via Amazon's Alexa digital assistant (2017, September 21) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-09-mayo-clinic-aid-amazon-alexa.html>

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