

PRACTICE EXTENDERS: AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

# An app to help your patient lose weight

↘ The increasing use of smartphones among women presents an opportunity to address health issues, such as obesity

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**F**orty-four percent of US women own a smartphone, according to the latest data.<sup>1</sup> Ownership is highest among younger women, with more than 60% of women between the ages of 18 and 34 owning one of these devices.<sup>1</sup>

One of the features that makes a smartphone, well, smart is the ability to run apps (short for software “applications”). Apps started out as ways to enhance access to email or calendars, but the market has exploded—both demand and supply—so that there are now apps for essentially anything you might ever need. Apple’s app store, the largest, boasts more than 500,000 apps, and more than 25 billion apps had been downloaded by March 2012.<sup>2</sup> Medical app developers are keen to capitalize on our ever-increasing “app”-etite.

Medical apps can be divided into two categories: those that can help the patient and those that can help the provider. This series will review what I call prescription apps—in other words, apps that you might consider recommending to your patient to enhance her medical care.

## Apps are not new to your patients

Many of your patients are already looking at medical apps and want to hear your opinion. I know that my smartphone users are uniformly interested in hearing my recommendations, and it is not uncommon that the free apps I recommend are downloaded before my patient leaves the office.

If you are not an app user yourself, there are two basic things that you should know. First, some apps are free and others are not, although that is not necessarily a measure of quality or utility. Second, apps must be written for the particular device, so it is important to know whether the app you are recommending is supported by your patient’s smartphone. As of February 2012, the most common devices are the Android (20% of cell phone users), iPhone (19%), and Blackberry (6%).<sup>1</sup> Some apps can also be used on tablets (e.g., iPad, Galaxy) and e-book readers (e.g., Nook, Kindle). Use of these devices is also

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**COMING SOON**  
An app to remind patients to take their contraceptive pills



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*Dr. Gunter reports no financial relationships relevant to this article.*

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increasing; currently, 29% of Americans own either a tablet or an e-book reader.<sup>3</sup>

## When the clinical need is weight loss

Lose It! is a weight-management app that tracks calories, exercise, and weight. Considering that more than 30% of US women are obese, working toward a healthy weight is a common office discussion and any additional tool is welcome.<sup>4</sup> Journaling, or recording every single thing that is eaten, is a key component of successful dieting. Smartphone users tend to have their phones with them wherever they are, so an app is an ideal tool for the journaling commitment needed for weight loss.

Lose It! is free and works on the following platforms:

- Android
- iPhone
- iPad
- Nook Color
- Nook Tablet.

### Advantages include ease of use

The patient need only enter her current weight and height (measure your patient during the visit to ensure that she gets started with accurate numbers), the weight she hopes to attain (you can discuss this as well), and how many pounds she hopes to lose each week, and the app calculates the recommended calorie intake to achieve this goal. The app comes preloaded with thousands of foods, and it enables barcode scanning to upload the food and nutritional content

with just a click of the phone's camera.

The database can be expanded by adding unlisted foods and even recipes. Synchronizing the phone with Loseit.com allows for emailed summaries and reminders when the patient forgets to log a meal. There is also a wide repository of exercises to choose from when logging an activity.

### A couple of cons

There is no Lose It! app for the Blackberry—and no plans to write one.

Another disadvantage is the extremely basic exercise journaling (no weekly or review function), and exercise calories are automatically added into the user's daily allotment—not every dieter wants their calories set up this way.

### Pros far outweigh the cons

This is the app I used to journal my 50-lb weight loss (and 6 months of maintenance). I think that testimonial speaks for itself. ☺

*In the next installment: an app that reminds your patient to take her birth control pills.*

### References

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**Journaling, or recording every single thing that is eaten, is a key component of successful dieting**

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