

Ford Driving Health, Safety With Mobile Apps

The new programs may eventually warn patients with chronic disorders of an impending emergency, or let them upload data directly to a personal health record.

By [Marianne Kolbasuk McGee](#) InformationWeek
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Ford Motors is working to bring new meaning to the term "mobile healthcare apps." The automobile maker is researching in-car health and wellness connectivity services and applications for people with chronic conditions such as diabetes and allergies. And if you're prone to road rage, a stress monitoring app may help you "tame the beast."



The apps leverage the Bluetooth connectivity, voice control, and cloud-based services of [Ford's Sync](#) "infotainment" system that allows drivers to make hands-free calls from their cellphones, use voice commands to change the music playing on their MP3 players, as well as access traffic info and driving directions," said Gary Strumolo, Ford global manager of interiors, infotainment, health, and wellness research.

The first [mobile health apps](#) aren't likely to show up on the market for about a year or so, he said.

However, work underway [at Ford](#) could tap Sync's voice control technology to allow diabetic drivers to safely answer questions about their condition for real-time coaching or to send the updates automatically to Web-based personal health records, where the data could be accessed by their doctors.

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Ford is also working with medical device maker Medtronic on continuous glucose monitoring and tracking capabilities that, via a Bluetooth connection and sound system speaker, could also warn diabetic drivers of low blood sugar levels before dizziness sets in.

These sorts of monitoring and communications could be done "while eyes are on the road and hands are on the wheel," he said.

The driver isn't the only person who could benefit from the apps. For instance, diabetic children could also be monitored, such as on long road trips. "Is the child in the back seat just sleeping, or suffering hypoglycemia?" he said. The apps could warn parents if something is amiss.

Also, if you're an adult child nervous about your elderly diabetic parent driving, the glucose readings could be sent to a Web-based personal health record platform such as [Microsoft HealthVault](#), from which the data could also be accessed by healthcare providers, while adult children receive a text alert that something is wrong, he said.

Ford is also working with health IT companies, including WellDoc and SDI Health, on development of mobile apps. Among the concepts: apps to help drivers and passengers with allergies plot routes based on pollen and smog levels in the vicinity, said Strumolo.

Late to an appointment because you're stuck in traffic? Also in the works is an application that measures a driver's stress levels through heart-rate detection sensors built into the auto's seats. Higher stress "can be mitigated" through the app suggesting a change, such as having soothing music played inside the vehicle, or having cell calls automatically routed to voice mail, he said.

Ford has already tested the stress technology to gauge the effectiveness of other features in its vehicles, including its automatic parallel parking system. Through collaborative research with MIT, Ford has found the parking systems reduce stress compared to drivers trying to parallel park on their own, he said.

And Ford isn't the only organization working on health-oriented apps to alleviate stress. The Veterans Administration recently introduced a new mobile app to help service personnel and vets suffering post-traumatic stress disorder easily find information about the condition, and tips for managing PTSD symptoms.

The VA said this week that since launching the [PTSD Coach](#) smartphone app in April, about 5,000 users have downloaded the app. About 96% of the PTSD Coach downloads so far are by users located in the United States, but the rest are from users in 25 countries.

Back at Ford, while a lot of the actual capabilities and features for the company's upcoming health apps are still being worked out, they're all part of a larger vision, said Stumolo.