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Wearable Technologies as Digital Biomarkers in Modern Clinical Research: Applications, Opportunities and Challenges

Isabelle M. Laurent
Department of Chemical Engineering, Université de Valmont, Belgium

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Abstract
Wearable technologies have rapidly evolved from consumer fitness devices into sophisticated tools for medical research and healthcare. Smartwatches, fitness trackers, biosensor patches, smart rings, continuous glucose monitors, and other wearable systems can collect physiological and behavioural information continuously or repeatedly outside conventional clinical environments. This capability has created significant opportunities for developing digital biomarkers, which are objectively measured physiological, behavioural, or biological characteristics collected through digital technologies and used to understand health, disease, or treatment response. Unlike conventional clinical measurements obtained during occasional healthcare visits, wearable devices can provide longitudinal information concerning heart rate, physical activity, sleep, body temperature, glucose levels, oxygen saturation, movement, and other variables. Such information may support early disease detection, remote monitoring, personalized medicine, decentralized clinical trials, and assessment of treatment effectiveness. Wearables are increasingly being investigated in cardiovascular medicine, diabetes, neurological disorders, respiratory disease, mental health, rehabilitation, ageing, and clinical pharmacology. Their integration with artificial intelligence can further enable prediction of disease progression and identification of subtle changes in physiological patterns. Nevertheless, substantial challenges remain, including sensor accuracy, data quality, device interoperability, algorithmic bias, participant adherence, privacy, cybersecurity, regulatory uncertainty, and uncertainty regarding the clinical meaning of many digital measurements. Recent research highlights growing interest in wearable-derived digital biomarkers and their use in clinical trials and drug development. (nature.com) This paper examines the concept of wearable digital biomarkers, major technologies, applications in medical research, advantages, limitations, ethical considerations, and future directions. It argues that wearable technologies could significantly strengthen longitudinal medical research when their measurements are rigorously validated and meaningfully connected to clinical outcomes.
Keywords: Wearable Technology, Digital Biomarkers, Smartwatch, Biosensors, Digital Health, Remote Monitoring, Clinical Trials, Precision Medicine, Artificial Intelligence, Medical Research

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1. Introduction

Medical research has traditionally relied on measurements collected during scheduled clinical encounters. Blood pressure, heart rate, laboratory values, imaging results, physical examinations, and patient questionnaires provide important information, but these measurements represent only limited moments in an individual's health trajectory. Many physiological and behavioural characteristics fluctuate continuously throughout the day. Consequently, occasional clinical measurements may fail to capture important changes occurring between healthcare visits.

The development of wearable technologies has created new opportunities to address this limitation. Modern wearable devices can continuously or repeatedly collect physiological and behavioural information using miniaturized sensors and wireless communication systems. Smartwatches and fitness trackers may record heart rate, movement, sleep, and oxygen saturation, while specialized wearable sensors can measure glucose, temperature, electrodermal activity, respiration, or other parameters.

These measurements can potentially serve as digital biomarkers. A digital biomarker is generally understood as an objectively measured characteristic collected through digital devices that can provide information relevant to health, disease, or treatment. Digital biomarkers may be used for diagnosis, prognosis, monitoring, or evaluation of therapeutic response.

The development of wearable digital biomarkers is particularly relevant to modern clinical research. Researchers can potentially monitor participants continuously rather than relying exclusively on periodic clinic visits. This may improve the measurement of disease progression, treatment response, physical function, sleep, activity, and other outcomes.

Recent research highlights the increasing use of wearable technologies in clinical trials and drug development, reflecting the growing interest in continuous physiological monitoring and digitally derived endpoints. (nature.com)

2. Concept of Digital Biomarkers

Traditional biomarkers include laboratory measurements, imaging characteristics, genetic variants, and physiological parameters that provide information about disease or biological processes. Digital biomarkers extend this concept by using digitally collected measurements.

A digital biomarker may be derived from movement patterns, heart-rate variability, sleep behaviour, voice characteristics, glucose measurements, or other digital signals. The important distinction is that the measurement must have a meaningful relationship with a biological or clinical phenomenon.

For example, changes in walking speed or daily activity may provide information about physical functioning. Changes in heart-rate patterns may provide information relevant to cardiovascular health. Alterations in sleep may reflect disease progression or treatment effects.

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However, not every measurement produced by a wearable device qualifies automatically as a validated digital biomarker. Researchers must establish analytical validity, reliability, clinical relevance, and where appropriate, responsiveness to meaningful changes in health status.

3. Types of Wearable Technologies

Wearable technology includes a broad range of devices. Smartwatches are among the most widely used systems and can collect multiple physiological and behavioural measurements.

Fitness trackers generally focus on physical activity, steps, energy expenditure, heart rate, and sleep-related measures. Although many are consumer-oriented, their data are increasingly being explored in research.

Smart rings offer another compact platform for measuring variables such as heart rate, temperature, movement, and sleep. Their smaller form factor may improve comfort and long-term adherence for some users.

Wearable patches can incorporate specialized sensors and may continuously monitor physiological variables. Some systems are designed for medical purposes and can collect data for extended periods.

Continuous glucose monitoring systems provide another important example. Sensors measure glucose-related information repeatedly, offering a detailed picture of glucose patterns rather than relying solely on occasional blood measurements.

More specialized wearable devices can measure electrocardiographic signals, respiration, muscle activity, body temperature, or other physiological characteristics.

4. Cardiovascular Research

Cardiovascular medicine is one of the most important applications of wearable technologies. Wearable devices can collect heart-rate and rhythm information outside the clinic, potentially allowing detection of intermittent abnormalities.

Wearable electrocardiography systems can help identify irregular rhythms such as atrial fibrillation. Continuous monitoring may be particularly valuable because some arrhythmias occur unpredictably and may not be captured during a short clinical examination.

Wearable devices can also provide information about physical activity and heart-rate response to exercise. Longitudinal measurements may help researchers study changes in functional capacity.

Heart-rate variability has been investigated as a physiological measure related to autonomic function and other health conditions. However, interpretation can be complex because it is influenced by age, fitness, stress, sleep, medications, and other factors.

For clinical research, wearable cardiovascular data may provide additional endpoints for evaluating treatment effects or disease progression.

5. Diabetes and Metabolic Research

Diabetes management has been significantly influenced by wearable and connected technologies. Continuous glucose monitoring provides repeated measurements that reveal glucose fluctuations throughout the day.

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Traditional laboratory measurements such as glycated haemoglobin provide important information about longer-term glucose control, while continuous monitoring can reveal patterns that may otherwise remain hidden.

Researchers can combine glucose data with information about physical activity, food intake, sleep, and medication use. Such multimodal information may support more individualized approaches to diabetes management.

Wearable systems are also being investigated in obesity and metabolic research. Activity patterns, sleep, heart rate, and other measurements may help researchers understand relationships between behaviour and metabolic health.

However, wearable-derived metabolic information must be interpreted carefully. Sensor measurements can contain errors, and behavioural factors are often difficult to capture accurately.

6. Neurological and Movement Disorders

Wearables provide valuable opportunities for studying neurological and movement disorders because they can continuously monitor physical activity and movement patterns.

In Parkinson's disease, wearable sensors may measure tremor, gait, movement speed, and motor fluctuations. Such data could provide objective information about symptoms that traditionally depend heavily on clinical observation and patient reports.

In stroke rehabilitation, wearable devices may measure limb movement and physical activity during recovery. Continuous monitoring could help researchers evaluate rehabilitation effectiveness and functional improvement.

Wearables are also being investigated in multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, neurodegenerative diseases, and other neurological conditions. The ability to collect data in natural environments may provide a more representative picture of everyday functioning than measurements collected exclusively in clinical settings.

7. Sleep and Mental Health Research

Wearable devices can monitor sleep-related behaviours and physiological characteristics. Sleep duration, movement, heart rate, and other measurements may provide useful information for research into sleep disorders and broader health conditions.

Sleep patterns are also relevant to mental health research. Changes in activity, sleep, social rhythms, and physiological measures may provide information associated with stress, depression, anxiety, or other conditions.

Digital phenotyping combines multiple digital signals to characterize patterns of behaviour and health. Wearable data can contribute to this approach by providing continuous measurements.

However, mental health conditions are complex and cannot be diagnosed reliably from a single wearable measurement. Digital signals should therefore be interpreted as potential sources of supporting information rather than definitive diagnostic evidence.

8. Wearables in Clinical Trials

One of the most promising applications of wearable technologies is the modernization of clinical trials. Traditional trials often depend on periodic visits and measurements collected at predetermined time points. Wearables can provide continuous or frequent information between visits.

This can help researchers assess physical activity, sleep, heart rate, mobility, or other outcomes throughout the trial. Continuous monitoring may reduce reliance on participant recall and provide richer longitudinal datasets.

Wearables may also facilitate decentralized or hybrid clinical trials, in which participants can complete some assessments remotely. This may reduce travel burdens and increase convenience.

Recent research emphasizes that wearable-derived digital biomarkers are increasingly relevant to clinical trials and drug development. (nature.com)

However, regulators and researchers must determine whether a wearable-derived measurement is sufficiently validated to serve as a clinical trial endpoint. A technically measurable variable is not necessarily an outcome that reflects meaningful clinical benefit.

9. Digital Biomarkers and Precision Medicine

Wearable technologies may contribute to precision medicine by providing individualized longitudinal information. Traditional clinical assessments often classify patients according to broad categories, while wearable data can reveal individual patterns.

For example, two patients with the same diagnosis may have different activity profiles, sleep patterns, heart-rate responses, or physiological fluctuations. Such differences may eventually help researchers identify clinically meaningful subgroups.

AI can analyze large quantities of wearable data and identify patterns associated with disease or treatment response. Machine-learning models may potentially predict deterioration or identify individuals who require clinical attention.

The combination of wearable data with genomic, clinical, imaging, and laboratory information could produce highly detailed individual health profiles.

10. Artificial Intelligence and Wearable Data

The volume of information produced by wearable devices can be enormous. AI and machine-learning technologies provide methods for processing these datasets.

Machine-learning algorithms can detect patterns in time-series physiological data. Deep-learning systems can analyze complex signals and identify features associated with particular outcomes.

AI may also enable anomaly detection. Instead of relying on fixed thresholds, algorithms could learn an individual's typical physiological pattern and identify deviations from that baseline.

However, AI models can inherit biases from their training data. Differences in age, sex, skin characteristics, fitness levels, device type, and socioeconomic factors may affect data quality and algorithm performance.

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Therefore, AI-driven wearable systems require validation across diverse populations and real-world conditions.

11. Advantages of Wearable Digital Biomarkers

Wearable technologies offer several potential advantages for medical research. First, they allow continuous or frequent measurement. Second, they can capture health information in real-world environments rather than only in hospitals or laboratories.

Third, wearable devices may reduce participant burden in some studies by allowing remote data collection. Fourth, they can generate objective measurements that complement patient-reported outcomes.

Wearables may also improve understanding of disease variability. Many chronic conditions fluctuate over time, and continuous monitoring can reveal patterns that short clinical assessments cannot capture.

For clinical trials, wearable measurements may provide additional information about treatment response and patient functioning.

12. Limitations and Data Quality

Wearable technologies are not free from limitations. Sensor accuracy can vary between devices and environmental conditions. Measurements may be affected by movement, device placement, skin contact, battery limitations, or software changes.

Participant adherence is another major concern. Individuals may stop wearing devices, forget to charge them, or use them inconsistently. Missing data can create analytical problems.

Consumer devices may also change their algorithms without researchers having complete access to the underlying processing methods. This can affect longitudinal research and reproducibility.

Data synchronization and interoperability present additional challenges. Researchers may collect data from different devices that use different formats and measurement protocols.

Consequently, standardization and validation are essential for transforming raw wearable measurements into reliable scientific evidence.

13. Privacy and Cybersecurity

Wearable devices generate sensitive health information. Continuous data may reveal not only physiological characteristics but also daily routines, locations, sleep schedules, activity patterns, and other personal information.

Privacy risks therefore extend beyond traditional medical records. Data transmitted through smartphones, cloud platforms, and research databases require appropriate security measures.

Researchers must clearly define how wearable data will be collected, stored, analyzed, shared, and retained. Participants should receive understandable information concerning data use.

Cybersecurity is equally important because connected devices can potentially become targets for unauthorized access or manipulation.

Responsible wearable research therefore requires strong technical security combined with ethical data governance.

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14. Regulatory and Clinical Challenges

The increasing use of wearable technologies creates challenges for regulatory systems. Consumer wellness devices and regulated medical devices may have different standards and intended uses.

A device designed for general fitness tracking may not have been validated for diagnosing a disease. Researchers must distinguish between consumer-generated measurements and clinically validated medical technologies.

Regulatory evaluation should consider intended use, analytical performance, clinical validity, safety, interoperability, cybersecurity, and reliability.

Clinical adoption also requires evidence that using a wearable measurement actually improves healthcare. Simply detecting a physiological change does not necessarily improve outcomes.

15. Future Directions

The future of wearable medical research is likely to involve increasingly sophisticated multimodal devices. Sensors may simultaneously monitor several physiological characteristics and integrate them with clinical and behavioural information.

Flexible and skin-integrated electronics could make wearable sensors more comfortable and capable of continuous monitoring. Advances in materials science may enable smaller, more energy-efficient, and more accurate devices.

Artificial intelligence will likely play a larger role in interpreting wearable data. Personalized algorithms may learn individual baselines and identify meaningful deviations.

Digital biomarkers may also become increasingly important in clinical trials. They could support remote monitoring, patient stratification, treatment-response assessment, and decentralized trial designs.

Nevertheless, future research should focus on clinically meaningful endpoints rather than simply generating larger volumes of data. Validation must demonstrate that digital measurements provide information that improves research quality or patient outcomes.

16. Conclusion

Wearable technologies have created a significant opportunity to transform medical research by enabling continuous and real-world measurement of physiological and behavioural characteristics. Smartwatches, biosensors, smart rings, continuous glucose monitors, and specialized wearable systems can generate longitudinal information relevant to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, neurological disorders, sleep, mental health, rehabilitation, ageing, and clinical trials.

The concept of digital biomarkers is particularly important because it provides a framework for transforming raw digital measurements into scientifically meaningful indicators of health and disease. Recent research indicates growing interest in wearable-derived digital biomarkers as tools for modern clinical trials and drug development. (nature.com)

However, technological availability should not be confused with clinical validity. Sensor accuracy, data quality, participant adherence, algorithmic bias, interoperability, privacy, cybersecurity, and regulatory requirements remain substantial challenges.

The future success of wearable technologies will therefore depend on rigorous validation, standardized methods, responsible data governance, inclusive research, and evidence demonstrating meaningful clinical value. When appropriately developed and evaluated, wearable digital biomarkers could become an important component of precision medicine and modern clinical research, providing researchers and healthcare professionals with a more continuous, individualized, and ecologically valid understanding of human health.

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