



Gift Guide: Tech gadgets can boost your workouts

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STORY

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The Nike SportBand and sensor

In simpler times, maintaining good health was a matter of joining a gym or lacing up running shoes for a loop in the park. At most, you'd buy a watch with a digital display so you could time your laps.

These days, a range of gadgets can help boost your workouts. And I'm not talking about iPods that distract you as you lift weights or sprint to nowhere on a treadmill. Technology can now track your exercise progress, count calories and more.

Fitness enthusiasts may appreciate some of these gift ideas.

Comments (1)

Garmin Forerunner 310XT (\$350; with heart rate monitor, \$400)

Since 2003, I've been using GPS devices to keep track of how far I've run and how fast I'm going. Some even try to keep me on pace, beeping endlessly when I'm short of my goal. A new Garmin model offers longer battery life and improvements for triathletes.

What's new: An update to the Forerunner 305, the 310XT is waterproof to about 165 feet. But GPS signals don't travel well in water, so don't expect good distance readings while swimming — and forget scuba diving.

What's the same: Like its predecessor, the 310XT offers a "multisport" mode. Press a button as you move from event to event in a triathlon. Afterward, review times and pace calculations for each event and transitions. Unfortunately, this model shares a major limitation with all GPS gadgets: They don't work indoors, and tall buildings can distort signals from the satellites.

What else: If the gift recipient is primarily a runner, check out the Forerunner 405CX (\$370), an update to last year's 405. Unlike other models, whose four-sided designs don't win fashion points, the 405 series resemble regular watches.

Nike Plus SportsBand (\$59)

Nike and Apple teamed up in 2006 to create a fitness platform that offers many of the benefits of GPS devices, without needing a good signal. A small sensor fits snugly into a slot built into some Nike shoes and sends data wirelessly to an iPod Nano, iPod Touch or iPhone 3GS to track and display your pace and distance. The SportsBand, with small updates this year, lets you ditch the Apple device.

What's nice: I own a Nano and carry it on most runs to listen to my backlog of "This American Life" and other podcasts. Not everyone wants an iPhone or iPod, though, so this standalone unit is a decent alternative.

What's not: You still need Nike shoes, which may not be a good fit for all runners. Other companies make a specially designed pouch that attaches to your shoelaces with Velcro, but the contraption doesn't work as well.

What's confusing: I took the SportsBand for several runs without getting it to work — until I noticed instructions hidden underneath the plastic casing it came in. Gadgets that perform so few functions shouldn't require instructions.

Timex Expedition WS4 (\$200)

This gadget, launched in May, is designed more for hikers than runners or bikers. Along with basic timing functions you'd expect from most digital watches, the WS4 offers elevation, temperature and compass readings. It also has a barometer mode, for those who care.

What's annoying: I'm used to GPS devices that work out of the box. Because the Expedition has no GPS and uses built-in sensors, it needs to be calibrated. You'll need to know your current elevation and something called the declination angle.

What's nice: It works indoors, and it's useful for more than hiking. Once calibrated, the compass can guide you on which way to go once you emerge from a subway.

Coheso CalorieSmart CS-100S (\$80)

Keeping fit isn't all about owning the latest GPS device. CalorieSmart is a handheld calorie counter that resembles a pocket calculator. Type in what you're eating, and the device looks up nutritional data and logs your day's calories. Type in your exercise, and the device calculates calories burned. The version out this year is lighter and smaller — the size of a deck of playing cards — and has a larger database of nutritional information.

What's nice: No more guessing what's in that Big Mac. I was glad to know I still came out ahead when I munched down two Philly cheesesteaks after running a marathon.

What's annoying: I wish the database had more information on generic food items. Those who cook a lot will have to spend time manually adding their favorite recipes.

What else: For \$59, you can get the CS-80S, which lacks a USB port for transferring data to a computer. The \$20 CS-NL100 offers nutritional lookup for individual items, but doesn't log your meals or keep track of calories.

Gymboss Interval Timer (\$20)

Fitness gadgets don't have to be expensive. For roughly the price of a movie for two, the Gymboss helps keep your workouts on track by letting you know when to start or stop. With two separate timers, Gymboss can tell you, for instance, to put down your weights after three minutes and lift them again after a one-minute rest. This year's model has new colors and a louder beep.

What's unnecessary: You can do much of this with many watches. Even the iPod has a built-in timer.

What's nice: The beeping, and the fact that you can set separate times for working out and resting.