

WHO GUIDELINE

RECOMMENDATIONS ON DIGITAL INTERVENTIONS FOR HEALTH SYSTEM STRENGTHENING



World Health
Organization

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Foreword



Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director-General
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Human health has only ever improved because of advances in technology. From the development of modern sanitation to the advent of penicillin, anesthesia, vaccines and magnetic resonance imaging, science, research and technology have always been key drivers of better health.

It's no different today. Advances in technology are continuing to push back the boundaries of disease. Digital technologies enable us to test for diabetes, HIV and malaria on the spot, instead of sending samples off to a laboratory. 3-D printing is revolutionizing the manufacture of medical devices, orthotics and prosthetics. Telemedicine, remote care and mobile health are helping us transform health by delivering care in people's homes and strengthening care in health facilities. Artificial intelligence is being used to give paraplegic patients improved mobility, to manage road traffic and to develop new medicines. Machine learning is helping us to predict outbreaks and optimize health services.

Propelled by the global ubiquity of mobile phones, digital technologies have also changed the way we manage our own health. Today we have more health information – and misinformation – at our fingertips than any generation in history. Before we ever sit down in a doctor's office, most of us have Googled our symptoms and diagnosed ourselves – perhaps inaccurately. Similarly, digital technologies are being used to improve the training and performance of health workers, and to address a diversity of persistent weaknesses in health systems.

Harnessing the power of digital technologies is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, including universal health coverage and the other "triple billion" targets in WHO's 13th General Programme of Work. Such technologies are no longer a luxury; they are a necessity.

A key challenge is to ensure that all people enjoy the benefits of digital technologies for everyone. We must make sure that innovation and technology helps to reduce the inequities in our world, instead of becoming another reason people are left behind. Countries must be guided by evidence to establish sustainable harmonized digital systems, not seduced by every new gadget.

That's what this guideline is all about.

At the Seventy-First World Health Assembly, WHO's Member States asked us to develop a global strategy on digital health. This first WHO guideline establishes recommendations on digital interventions for health system strengthening and synthesizes the evidence for the most important and effective digital technologies.

The nature of digital technologies is that they are evolving rapidly; so will this guideline. As new technologies emerge, new evidence will be used to refine and expand on these recommendations. WHO is significantly enhancing its work in digital health to ensure we provide our Member States with the most up-to-date evidence and advice to enable countries to make the smartest investments and achieve the biggest gains in health. Ultimately, digital technologies are not ends in themselves; they are vital tools to promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus'.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

Director-General, World Health Organization

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