In the Future, Amazon's Alexa Could Help Diagnose Medical Conditions

The virtual assistant may even be able to detect oncoming heart attacks.

August 6, 2019 By Alicia Green

Amazon's Alexa can already perform a handful of health-related tasks, such as tracking blood sugar levels and describing symptoms. But the popular virtual assistant may one day be able to help doctors diagnose a multitude of medical conditions, reports Kaiser Health News.

Among the health problems the device might be able to diagnose are mental illness, autism, concussions and Parkinson's disease. In addition, Amazon hopes Alexa will be able to recognize when someone is having a heart attack.

Investigators at the University of Washington in Seattle recently published a study in which they taught Alexa to listen for distant gasping sounds known as agonal breathing, an early warning sign in about half of cardiac arrest cases. (Alexa correctly identified agonal breathing in 97% of instances and registered a false positive only 0.2% of the time.)

Opportunities to use Alexa for medical care have greatly expanded since Alexa received permission to access and relay patients' private health information in compliance with the health privacy law known as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). The OK allows Alexa to work with health care companies to customize the wellness services they offer consumers.

In addition, Amazon owns patents on other technology that Alexa can use to tell when someone is sick, suggest solutions and monitor blood flow and heart rate.

Other possibilities for Alexa—and similar artificial intelligence technologies—include the development of wearable devices for transmitting information about falls or uneven walking. What's more, Alexa is learning how to make conversation, which could allow it to engage with people in more personal ways.

As health care providers, medical technology companies and insurers increasingly experiment with Alexa, industry experts speculate that the virtual assistant's capabilities could drastically change the way individuals get health information and treatment.

“Think about people living in small towns who aren’t always getting access to care and knowing when to get health care,” said Sandhya Pruthi, MD, a family medicine doctor who has used voice assistants and a lead investigator for several breast cancer prevention trials at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. “Could this be an opportunity, if someone had symptoms, to say, ‘It’s time for this to get checked out’?”

For related coverage, read “Amazon’s Alexa Skills Kit Is a Health Care Game Changer” and “Amazon’s Alexa May Soon Be Able to Check Your Blood Sugar.”

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