

25 May 2021 | News

Post-COVID Consumers Want Digitally Enabled, Personalized And Continuous Self-Care

by David Ridley

Digital apps, wearables and home diagnostic tests - as well as dietary supplements - offer today's consumers ways of personalizing and embedding self-care into daily life, argued panelists at IQVIA Consumer Health's latest webinar.

How has the coronavirus pandemic shaped consumer healthcare habits? This is the key question for OTC firms looking to adapt their product portfolios to the “new normal.”

Speakers at IQVIA Consumer Health’s recent panel discussion on “The Real World of Consumer Health R&D” suggested that consumers, more than ever, want their self-care purchases – which increasingly include digital products, like apps and wearables – to be personalized and continuous.

Voices from industry – Bayer's Andreas Ehret and AESGP's Jurate Švarcaite – emphasized the importance of prevention to the post-COVID consumer, as well as a desire to maintain good health and well-being on a day-to-day basis.

While health tech experts Swapna Kondapuram, of IQVIA Consumer Health, and Mathieu Letombe, CEO of Withings, pointed out that digital tools can bring wellness closer than ever to the consumer, integrating self-care into not only daily routines but also into the home itself.

Consumer-Centric

“We need to transform our businesses, we need to make use of new digital technologies to make them more consumer-centric,” insisted Andreas Ehret, Bayer Consumer Health’s director of clinical development services. “We need to go beyond randomized control clinical trials to find

new types of studies, ways of generating data, and we need to make this more consumer friendly.”

Smart devices like wearables and fitness trackers, as well as social media, could help industry bring consumers into the R&D process itself, generating real world evidence and data, while also adding additional value to traditional products like OTC medicines and dietary supplements, he said.

Technological self-care innovations need to “appeal to the consumer” and be easily integrated into their “daily efforts at wellbeing.” – Bayer Consumer Health's Andreas Ehret

Most importantly, technological self-care innovations need to “appeal to the consumer” and be easily integrated into their “daily efforts at wellbeing,” Ehret maintained.

Reflecting on the consumer healthcare market after a year of the coronavirus pandemic, Ehret said that today's consumers are now more sensitive to the seven pillars of self-care as set out by the International Self-Care Foundation. These are: health literacy, mental well-being, physical activity, healthy eating, risk avoidance, good hygiene and responsible use of products.

Personalized

“Consumers expect something different today, they expect more personalized consumer-centric solutions, and non-product self-care offerings that support them holistically, beyond the pill,” he explained. “So, I think the main difference to the past is that, beside punctual symptomatic treatment, consumers expect their needs to be seen in totality.”

In case of allergic rhinitis, for example, consumers are traditionally thought to be looking for symptomatic relief of runny, stuffy or itchy noses, Ehret continued.

But, he said, consumers are also bothered by secondary symptoms or effects like sleep disturbance or difficulty concentrating and focusing, both of which have an impact on their quality of life.

“What they are also interested in are self-care solutions which help them with these secondary effects, either by the core product or a combination of the core product and non-product

offerings,” he argued.

Preventative

Drawing on the results of a recent social listening exercise, AESGP director general Jurate Švarcaite confirmed that consumers have become more interested in self-care as a result of the pandemic.

“However, interest in self-care has been growing for a number of years before this, reaching a peak with the first wave of the COVID,” Švarcaite pointed out.

There is now more awareness of the personal responsibility that we all have in taking care of ourselves before we seek care from healthcare professionals like general practice doctors or a specialist, she continued.

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AESGP's Jurate Švarcaite*

“We also see a greater interest in prevention, in maintaining good health rather than treating what is already wrong with us,” Švarcaite said, which has meant that certain consumer healthcare categories like vitamins, tonics, and wellness products have seen rapid growth in the last year.

This turn to self-care and prevention has led to a “huge increase” in demand for digital health information within the European Union, Švarcaite noted. “Almost all of us have been online at the beginning of the pandemic checking our symptoms.”

For industry, this calls for products that can help consumers bridge this “information gap” between symptom and treatment, Švarcaite argued, while making sure that they are guided towards responsible self-care solutions.

Wearable

For IQVIA Consumer Health's global principal, R&D/real world evidence, Swapna Kondapuram, COVID-19 has not only "dramatically changed our lifestyle" but the rapid adoption of digital health tools has "evolved the very definition of self-care."

Last year saw a 25% year on year increase in the number of people across the world using some kind of fitness app, to about 826 million people, noted Kondapuram.

This number is predicted to reach around 1m people within the next three years. Use of wearables is also predicted to rise by about 26% year on year. "And then there's on-demand, digital health, adoption of which is rising as well," she added.

Home diagnosis tests are an exciting prospect for innovation in self-care, "particularly if they are easy to use and interpret at a consumer level." – IQVIA Consumer Health's Swapna Kondapuram

An area that Kondapuram highlighted as having "great potential" for the consumer health industry is mental health and well-being, "given the rising stress levels in our current world."

Home diagnosis tests are also an exciting prospect for innovation in self-care, she argued, "particularly if they are easy to use and interpret at a consumer level."

In general, Kondapuram said there's a "big future" for the digitally empowered consumer who, with improvements in health awareness and literacy, can take their healthcare into their own hands.

At Home

Digitalization also opens up the possibility of greater personalization, suggested wearables manufacturer Withings' CEO, Mathieu Letombe.

"Consumers don't want to be treated like other people who have the same conditions, they want personalized treatments," Letombe insisted. "And they also want to be supported in a continuous matter."

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“People with chronic conditions, for example, want weekly support, they don't want support every six months like in the old world,” he said. “They want to be supported from the comfort of their home. It's where you feel safe, it's where you spend most of your time. People don't want to spend time in the hospital, and they want to avoid the clinic.”

It is “really important” for consumer health companies to find ways of supporting people to stay healthy at home, which Letombe argued was the “biggest expectation” from consumers right now.