

How to use your Apple Watch to predict when you may get sick

The Vitals app can catch if your vitals are out of the norm. Here's how to use it to stay ahead of flu season.

Written by Lance Whitney, Contributor Dec. 3, 2024 at 5:48 a.m. PT



Lance Whitney/ZDNET

Sometimes a cold, sore throat, or other illness can catch you by surprise. If only you could get a head's up as to whether you're about to come down with something. That's where Apple's Vitals app may be able to help.

Introduced for the Apple Watch with WatchOS 11, the Vitals app uses data recorded about your heart rate, respiratory rate, wrist temperature, sleep duration, and other metrics while you're asleep. The app will then notify you if any metric seems out of whack compared with the usual

levels. You can also manually check the app on both the watch and your iPhone (or iPad) to view the data yourself.

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Before you get started, make sure you've updated your iPhone to iOS 18 or higher and your watch to WatchOS 11 or higher. On each device, go to **Settings**, select **General**, and tap **Software Update**. You'll be told that the device is up to date or prompted to download and install the latest version.

How to use the Vitals app

For the Vitals measurements to work, you must be willing to wear your Apple Watch to bed. First, you'll need to wear it for at least seven nights with a sleep schedule enabled. During that time, the Vitals app collects a typical baseline for each of the available health metrics.

To compare your nightly vitals against the baseline results, you should continually wear your watch when you go to sleep. Any notifications you receive will alert you to fluctuations in your baseline and may suggest certain contributing factors, such as new medications, changes in elevation, or an upcoming illness.

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Depending on the type of band you use, wearing the watch to bed is more comfortable than you might think. The trick is to keep the watch tight enough on your wrist so that the readings will register but not so tight that it bothers you. My watch is outfitted with a sport loop that I can easily adjust through the velcro strap. I often wear it to bed and forget it's even there. To make sure the watch has enough juice to last the night, I charge it for a couple of hours before going to sleep, and it's good to go.

Be aware that any measurements offered by the Vitals app are not intended for medical use. As always, consult a doctor if you're not feeling well or detect changes in your overall health. Normally, Vitals would be able to measure your blood oxygen level. But for legal reasons, Apple had to quash that feature on Apple Watch models sold in the US on or after January 18, 2024. However, there are still enough metrics to provide a good picture of your health.

Now, let's see how this works.

1. Set up your sleep schedule

Your first task is to establish a sleep schedule, which you can do on your Apple Watch or your iPhone. On your watch, open the Sleep app. You can set a sleep schedule only for the next wake up time or for all future wake ups. Since you need to record at least seven days of sleep for the Vitals app to work, you'll want to set up a schedule for all future wake ups.

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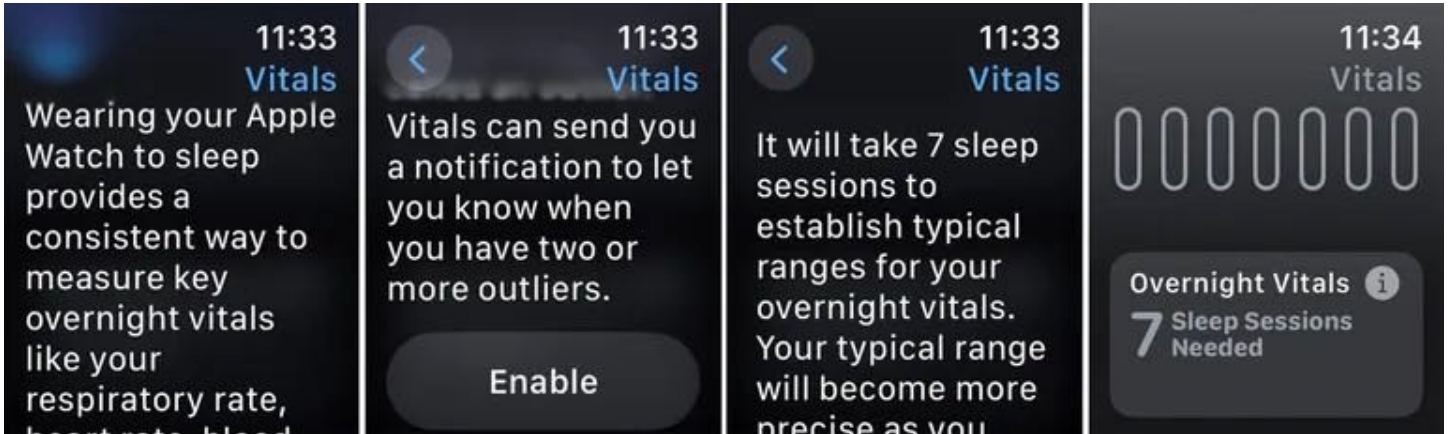
Turn on the switch for "Sleep Schedule." Swipe down the screen and tap the setting for "Set Your First Schedule." By default, the schedule will go into effect every day. To change this, tap the setting for "Every Day" and uncheck any days on which you don't want to follow your schedule.

Tap the setting for "Wake Up" to set your wake time. You can simply turn the Digital Crown to move from one hour or minute to another. After setting the time, tap the checkmark. You're also able to turn on an alarm if you need help getting up. Under Sounds & Haptics, you can set a specific sound and sensation to wake you up. Next, choose the setting for Bedtime and set the time you normally go to sleep. When done, tap the checkmark.



2. Launch the Vitals app

The first time you launch the Vitals app, you'll be told that you need to record seven sleep sessions. Wear your watch to bed each night.

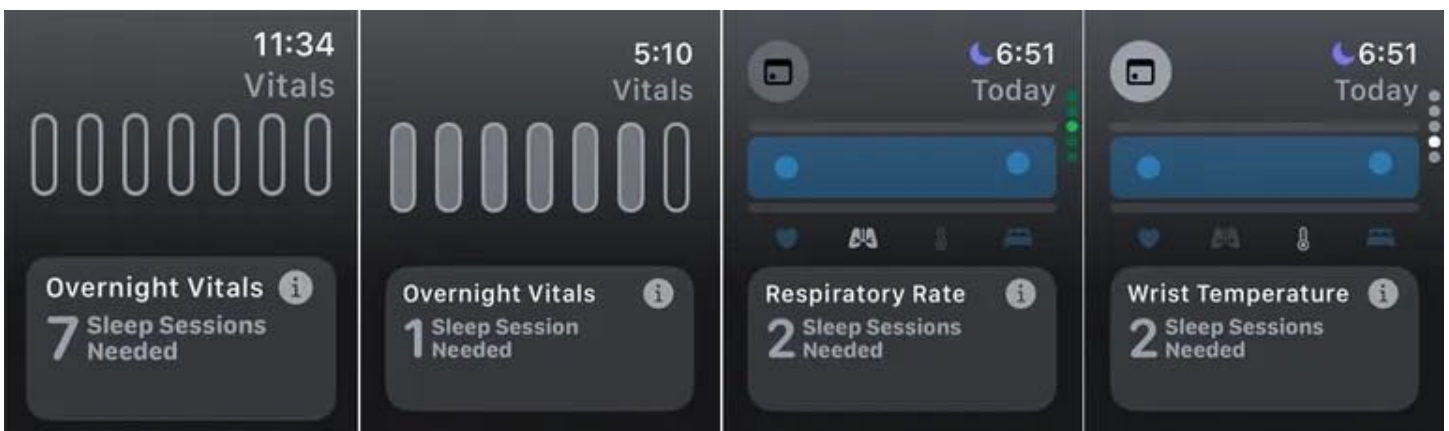


Screenshot by Lance Whitney/ZDNET

3. Record your sleep sessions

The next morning, check the app and you'll see that the count has gone down by one night with another oval image filled in.

At some point, the app will tell you if additional sessions are required for specific metrics, such as the respiratory rate or wrist temperature. Keep wearing your watch to bed until all the metrics have been recorded.



Screenshot by Lance Whitney/ZDNET

After you've collected all the baseline readings, continue wearing your watch to bed. Open the Vitals app on your Apple Watch to check the latest readings. If everything looks good, the latest overnight vitals will register as typical.

If not, you should have already received a notification alerting you to a change in your measurements, and the app will indicate any outliers. Swipe up on the screen to view the result for each metric. Tap the calendar icon in the upper left to see the results for the past seven days.

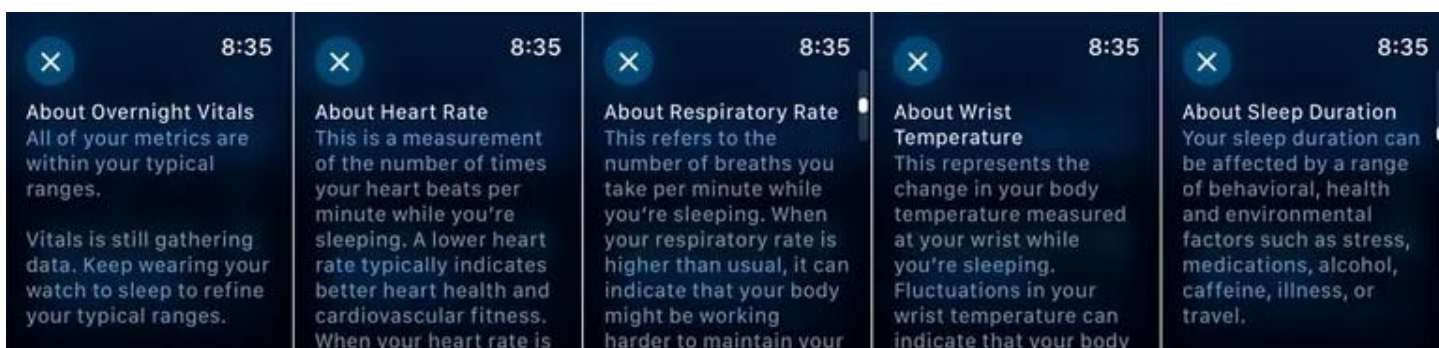


Screenshot by Lance Whitney/ZDNET

5. Learn more about each metric

To learn the significance of each metric, tap the reading itself. The About screen will describe the metric, what it measures, and why it's important. Tap the X to close the current About screen. Swipe up to the next metric and continue until you've covered each one.

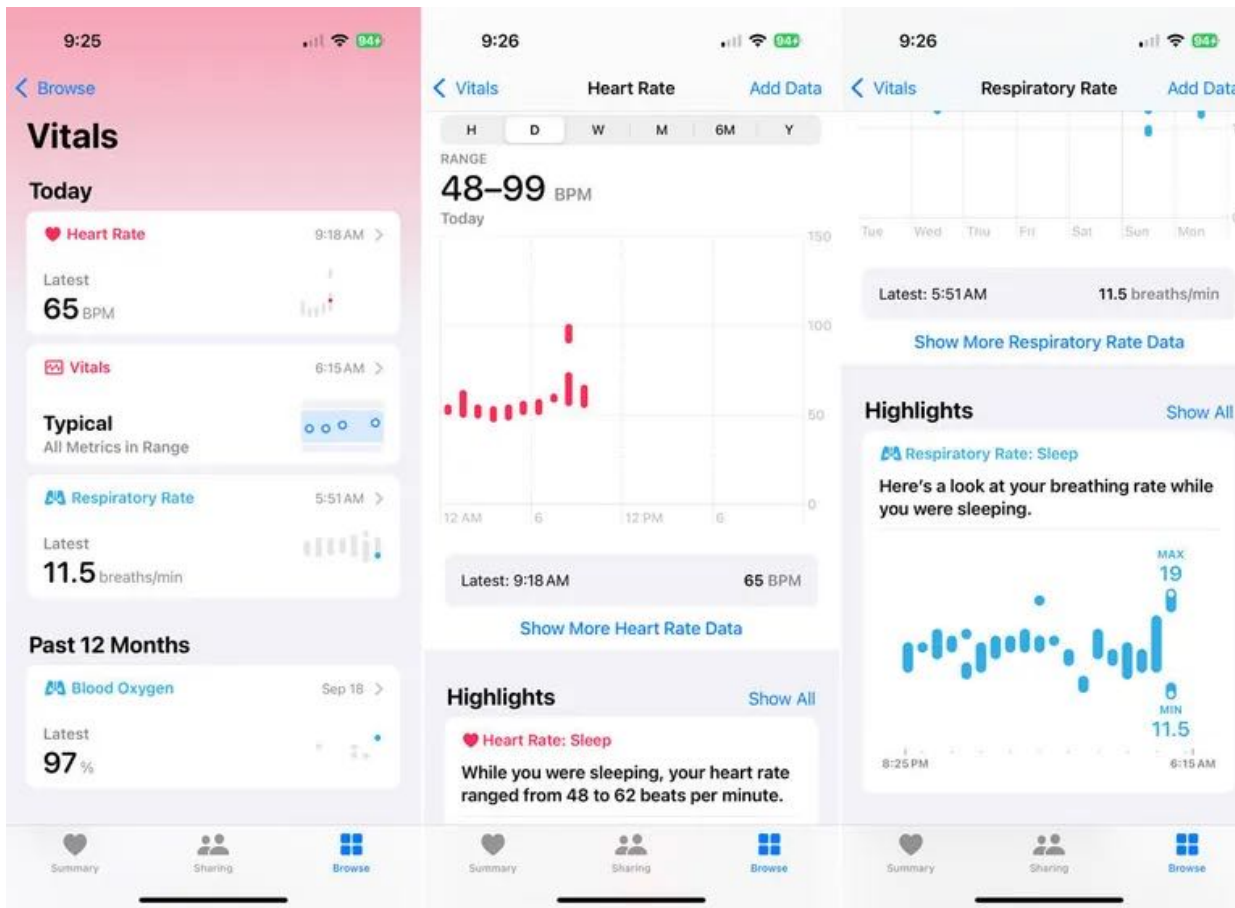
If you do find an outlier for any metric, the app will list contributing factors and may suggest steps you can take. Depending on the metric and the reading, you might want to contact your doctor or local pharmacy to get further help.



Screenshot by Lance Whitney/ZDNET

6. Check your vitals on the iPhone

Beyond viewing your vitals on the Apple Watch, you can check them on the iPhone, where you'll find more details. For this, open the Health app on the phone, tap the Browse icon at the bottom, and select Vitals from the Health Categories section. The screen will show the most recent vitals as well as older results. Tap a specific result to view the highlights, a chart, and historical information.



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