

A framework of digital biomarkers for neurodegenerative diseases

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Abstract

Digital biomarkers (DBMs) are a new class of health indicators derived from digital technologies – including smartphones, wearable devices and ambient sensors – that enable continuous, real-time monitoring of signals in everyday settings. By providing richer and more dynamic data than conventional, point-in-time measurements, DBMs offer fresh opportunities for remote patient assessment, personalized care and large-scale biomedical research. Importantly, DBMs function as powerful complementary tools to traditional biomarkers that can screen candidates for more invasive tests and provide contextual data between clinical visits. This Review provides a standardized classification of DBMs focused on neurodegenerative diseases, including Alzheimer disease, Parkinson disease, mild cognitive impairment, Huntington disease, multiple sclerosis, frontotemporal dementia, spinocerebellar ataxia and dementia with Lewy bodies, centred around three questions: what is being measured (the concept of interest), how it is measured (the sensing technologies) and why it is measured (the application areas). By examining these dimensions, we highlight the potential of DBMs to transform clinical monitoring, early detection and therapeutic interventions in these disorders.

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Key points

- Digital biomarkers complement traditional biomarkers by providing continuous, real-world data that contextualizes sparse clinical measurements and screens candidates for more invasive testing.
- A three-dimensional framework classifies digital biomarkers by sensing technology (how), clinical application (why) and the health aspect captured (what), offering a structured foundation for the field.
- Parkinson disease has the most mature digital biomarker ecosystem, driven by quantifiable motor symptoms and clear utility for medication titration, unlike Alzheimer disease and other neurodegenerative diseases.
- Ambient and contactless sensors are emerging as critical tools for later-stage neurodegenerative diseases, where cognitive impairment limits adherence to wearable or active-task approaches.
- Regulatory frameworks, standardized validation protocols and transparent reporting are essential to translating digital biomarkers from research tools into clinically accepted end points.
- Multimodal sensor fusion and artificial intelligence-driven analytics can capture the multidomain nature of neurodegenerative diseases but require diverse training data, longitudinal validation and interpretable algorithms.

Introduction

Medicine has long relied on traditional biomarkers, measurable indicators of a biological state or condition, to diagnose and monitor diseases. Typically derived from blood, urine or tissue samples, these point-in-time measurements have been fundamental in guiding clinical decisions and advancing our understanding of numerous health conditions^{1,2}. However, they often require costly and invasive procedures that are not easily scalable, and their sensitivity or specificity can vary substantially depending on the timing of collection, patient heterogeneity and differences in clinical practice². Additionally, biomarkers are limited as surrogate end points due to their indirect measurement nature and the complexities involved in meeting the requirements for candidacy and validation. For example, there are currently no validated surrogate biomarkers for Alzheimer disease, and many putative surrogates result in conflicting clinical trial outcomes (NCT03367403, NCT02477800, NCT04437511)³. These challenges are even more pronounced in neurodegenerative diseases (NDDs), where a gradual decline in brain function requires ongoing assessment to capture subtle changes that might otherwise be missed⁴. NDDs affect millions of people worldwide⁵, and traditional approaches, ranging from patient diaries and pen-and-paper tests to sporadic biological or imaging markers, can be prohibitively subjective, intrusive, time-consuming or expensive. As a result, there is an urgent need for objective, low-cost and continuous measures that can be collected in real-world environments. Digital biomarkers (DBMs) have emerged as a promising solution, offering a way to capture ecologically valid data and reach communities that are often underserved or underrepresented in research⁶.

DBMs are digital measures quantified using digital health technologies (DHTs)⁷, particularly remote monitoring technologies, such

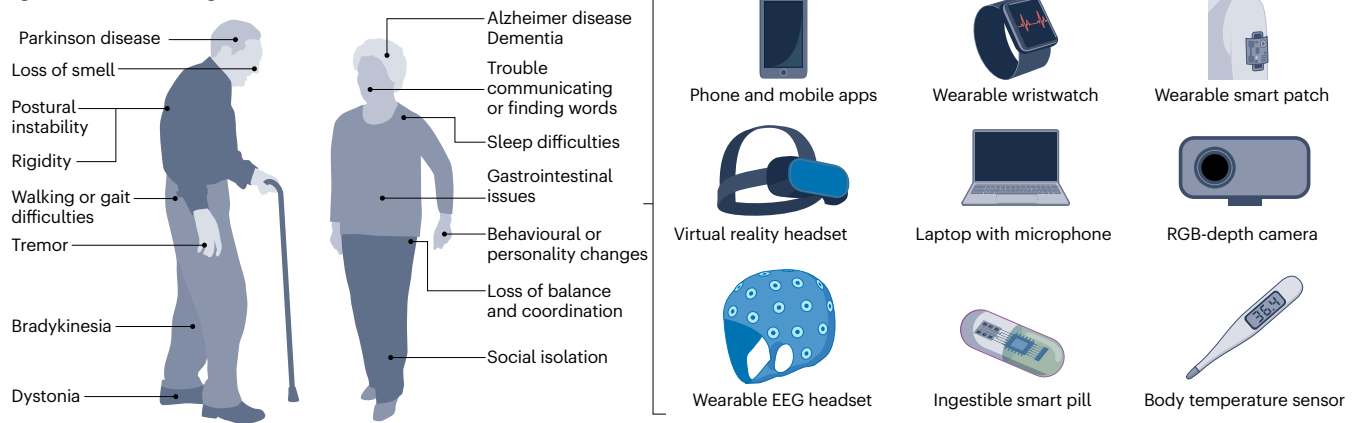
as wearables, portables and inner-body devices, as well as ambient and contactless sensing devices (Fig. 1). In this Review, we use the umbrella term DHTs to refer to technologies used outside the clinic. The term 'digital biomarkers' has evolved over the years owing to the broad popularization and adoption of DHTs, but the concept can be traced back to the advent of electronic medical devices and the digitization of medical records in the late twentieth century⁸. The field experienced great development in response to the miniaturization of digital technologies, advances in connectivity and display technologies, and robust app development ecosystems, which made remote monitoring technologies faster and cost-effective enough to be used by consumers and the broader research community⁷. Although the idea of using technologies to monitor health surrounding NDDs like Alzheimer disease had already been demonstrated in the early 2000s⁹, it was arguably the launch of the iPhone in 2007 and subsequent widespread smartphone use that spurred large-scale interest in DHTs, initiating a new digital health data collection era. The following explosion of mainstream fitness devices and wearables, such as Fitbit and Apple Watch, together with research-grade devices, like the *Axivity AX3* triaxial accelerometer and *Empatica E4* wireless wristband, further brought patient-generated health data measurement into the spotlight. Here, we first introduce a formal definition of DBMs and provide a structured overview of DBMs for NDDs. We structure this discussion around three key pillars (Fig. 2): (1) how the biological signal is measured, (2) why it is measured, and (3) what is being measured. By examining these dimensions, we offer a holistic understanding of how DBMs are personalized and used to monitor, diagnose and track the progression of NDDs. Using this framework, we aim to present a nuanced, multi-faceted view of DBMs, making the subject matter accessible and insightful to a general audience while highlighting the significance of these tools in advancing the understanding and treatment of NDDs.

Rethinking biomarkers for digital health

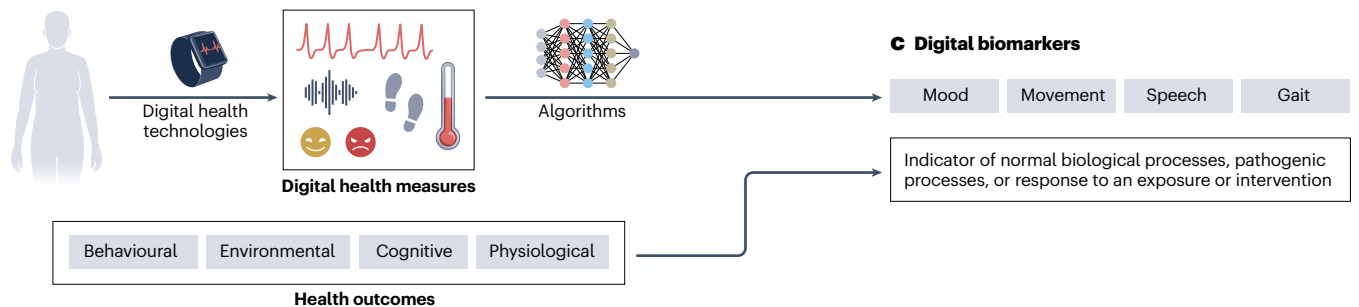
Despite growing use of the term 'digital biomarker', more precise terminology has evolved over time^{2,4,10,11}; the current consensus seems to refer to a specific DHT-derived quantity collected as a 'digital measure'^{12,13}. With regards to nomenclature, an exact definition of the term 'digital biomarker' that encompasses all use cases is difficult to find. For example, DBMs can be treated as equivalent to traditional biomarkers, only differing in the mode of data collection (via DHTs)¹². From this perspective, a DBM is measured as an indicator of biological processes, pathogenic processes or responses to interventions. However, this definition might be too narrow as it fails to encompass the full spectrum of DHT-captured data, particularly environmental or behavioural biomarkers that measure external factors or latent constructs rather than direct biological processes. A different and broader definition proposes DBMs to be: (1) direct measurements of biological processes (such as heart rate from photoplethysmography (PPG) sensors, glucose levels from continuous monitors or SpO₂ from smartwatch pulse oximeters, all of which are physiological signals with established clinical correlates) or (2) indirect measurements of latent variables such as typing speed as a proxy for fine motor control (potentially indicating Parkinson disease (PD) progression), GPS-derived social interaction patterns as depression indicators or voice acoustic features signalling cognitive decline¹⁴. Notably, measures like heart rate variability straddle both categories, representing both a direct physiological signal and a latent measure of autonomic balance. Similarly, actigraphy data from wearables directly measure movement but indirectly assess sleep quality, physical activity levels and circadian rhythmicity,

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a Digital health technologies



b Digital health measures



d Digital biomarker applications

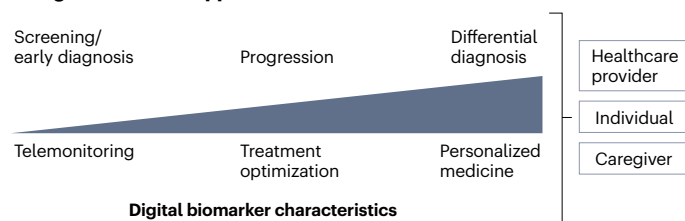


Fig. 1 | Digital health technologies, measures, biomarkers and clinical applications.

a, Examples of symptoms and the sensing tools used to monitor them. Phone and mobile apps¹⁰², wearable wristwatch¹²⁷, electronic ‘smart’ patch⁹⁹, virtual reality headset¹⁵⁵, laptop with microphone³⁶, RGB-depth camera¹¹³, wearable electroencephalogram (EEG) headset⁹⁵, smart ingestible pill¹⁰⁷,

and body temperature sensor⁷⁶. **b**, Digital health measures collected from digital health technologies and analysed using algorithms. **c**, Examples of digital biomarkers and commonly linked health outcomes. **d**, Digital biomarker characteristics and applications.

all of which serve as proxies for various health conditions ranging from insomnia to bipolar disorder. Importantly, researchers and regulatory bodies widely agree that a DBM is not an assessment of how a patient feels, functions or survives (that is, not a digital outcome assessment), as addressed by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)⁷. However, even this distinction can be ambiguous for digital measures¹⁵ like step count during a timed walk test, which could be interpreted as either a biomarker of motor function or a clinical outcome assessment of functional capacity, and the FDA’s current guidance on DHTs does not yet provide definitive criteria for resolving such boundary cases. Moreover, continuous measurement enables the capture of

entirely new biomarkers (such as diurnal variability) to provide new insights into health and disease. DBMs also support a timelier, more objective, comprehensive and personalized analysis of an individual’s health and its changes or responses to intervention. Finally, some DBMs have no traditional counterparts such as those collected during active digital clinical assessments – for example, cadence measured during a walk test.

Traditional biomarker classification

Traditionally, biomarkers are divided into different categories based on their clinical applications, characterized by the FDA–National

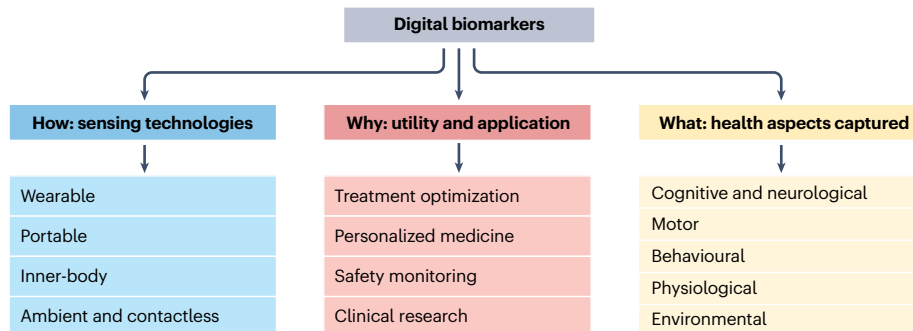


Fig. 2 | Categorization of digital biomarkers in neurodegenerative diseases.

The framework is organized across three fundamental dimensions: ‘How’ (sensing technologies) covers the technological modalities used for data acquisition, including wearable devices, portable sensors, inner-body sensors, and ambient/contactless systems; ‘why’ (utility and application) defines the

clinical and research purposes, spanning treatment optimization, personalized medicine approaches, safety monitoring, and clinical research applications; and ‘what’ (health aspects captured) outlines the measurable domains such as cognitive/neurological, motor, behavioural, physiological and environmental biomarkers.

Institutes of Health (NIH) Biomarkers, EndpointS and Other Tools (BEST) classification¹⁶:

1. Diagnostic biomarkers can detect whether a disease or other condition exists; for example, blood glucose levels are a diagnostic biomarker for type 2 diabetes mellitus¹⁷.
2. Predictive biomarkers help determine which individuals are more likely to experience a favourable or unfavourable outcome from a specific treatment. For example, the rs1080985G allele at *CYP2D6* is a predictive biomarker of poor response to cholinesterase inhibitors in donepezil, an Alzheimer disease medication¹⁸.
3. Prognostic biomarkers indicate how likely a clinical event, disease recurrence or progression will occur in patients with a particular disease. For example, elevated plasma pTau-181/217 levels in individuals with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is a prognostic biomarker of progression to Alzheimer disease-related dementia and cognitive decline¹⁹.
4. Susceptibility or risk biomarkers indicate an individual’s potential to develop a disease or condition without a specific intervention. *APOE* (encoding apolipoprotein E) polymorphisms are susceptibility biomarkers for PD dementia²⁰.
5. Safety biomarkers indicate the likelihood, presence or extent of toxicity of a therapeutic intervention. Liver enzyme levels, such as alanine aminotransferase and aspartate aminotransferase, are safety biomarkers for hepatotoxicity²¹.
6. Pharmacodynamic biomarkers demonstrate the biological response to a therapeutic intervention without evaluation of efficacy. For example, circulating tumour DNA levels serve as a pharmacodynamic biomarker to observe the response to radiotherapy in patients with lung cancer²².
7. Monitoring biomarkers continuously track the status of a disease, condition or therapeutic response. For example, serum neurofilament light chain concentration levels are a monitoring biomarker for axonal damage and neurodegeneration in multiple sclerosis²³.

Following the general idea of treating DBMs like traditional biomarkers, the former can be grouped using established regulatory frameworks to facilitate clinical translation and regulatory

approval pathways (Table 1 and Box 1). Moreover, DBMs can be further grouped based on their data collection method, that is, sensing modalities (such as wearable devices, portable devices, invasive devices, and ambient and contactless devices) or the health aspect they capture (such as physiological, behavioural, motor or cognitive markers). A commonly used classification scheme differentiates between two types of sensing: passive (no conscious effort required from the user) and active (intentional user interaction required)²⁴. In the following sections, we extend these classifications to provide a more comprehensive overview of the various modalities captured by DBMs (Fig. 3).

Categorization by health aspects captured

DBMs can be grouped based on the health or physiological parameters they monitor such as behavioural, environmental, cognitive and physiological biomarkers (Fig. 1c). The health aspect targeted by the biomarker determines its relevance to certain medical conditions or wellness areas (Fig. 3). Based on clinician expert knowledge, we categorize each biomarker by cost, invasiveness and data collection frequency. Cost assessments are based on post-ownership measurement expenses, that is, focusing on the marginal cost per clinically meaningful measurement episode rather than initial device acquisition costs, with categories ranging from low (US \$0–50) to high cost (over US \$500) based on consumables, professional time, laboratory processing and use of infrastructure. Invasiveness was assessed on a four-tier progressive scale representing increasing breach of the body’s natural barriers, from non-invasive procedures that require no physical intervention to highly invasive approaches that require surgical procedures or substantial tissue disruption. Data frequency categories are distinguished between episodic measurements (infrequent, typically months to years apart), periodic measurements (regular intervals from daily to monthly) and continuous measurements (real-time or high-frequency monitoring capabilities), based on the technological and practical limitations of each biomarker approach (Table 1 and Supplementary Table S1).

Cognitive and neurological biomarkers

Cognitive and neurological DBMs can be used to monitor and quantify neurological functions and cognitive processes through continuous,

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Table 1 | Examples of digital biomarkers

Biomarker category	Utility in NDDs	DBM examples		
		Study objective	Sensor	DBM measure
Diagnostic (presence of a disease)	Differentiate NDD A (such as AD) among a group of NDDs with similar symptoms (such as cognitive impairment often observed in AD, FTD and VD)	Differentiate MCI from healthy controls using recorded voice quality and speech fluency in a semantic memory test ³⁵	Portable recorder Speech data during a semantic memory test Researcher	Acoustic aspects of voice quality, namely cepstral peak prominence, centre of gravity and shimmer Speech fluency, namely articulation rate and average speaking time
Prognostic (likelihood of a clinical event, disease recurrence or progression)	Predict the future course of a NDD (for example, the onset of motor symptoms in PD)	Measure individual, longitudinal change in cognition in people with MCI or AD and healthy controls using 'digital neurosignature' from smartphone ³³	Altoida DNS (smartphone/tablet-based active digital assessment) 320+ cognitive and functional activity measures Participant	DNS metrics of intraindividual variability and dispersion (longitudinal digital cognitive change)
Monitoring (track disease or therapeutic response over time)	Track NDD progression (such as symptom changes in HD) or NDD treatment response (such as medication impact in PD)	Monitor limb movement to measure gait impairment in people with PD using a wearable accelerometer ⁴²	Accelerometer Limb movement while walking Researcher, clinician and participant	Triaxial gait variables (such as stride length, cadence, regularity index, symmetry index, and mechanical powers) Walking speed
Predictive (more likely to experience a favourable or unfavourable effect from treatment)	Predict response to specific NDD treatments (such as the efficacy of a drug in managing AD cognition or tremor responsiveness to motor neurorehabilitation therapy in PD)	Localize neural spectral power changes from high-density scalp EEG recording of people with PD, while modulating STN activity with DBS ¹⁰	Closed-loop implantable with sensing channels, neural stimulator, triaxial accelerometer and embedded algorithm Neural spectral power and synchrony Participant, clinician, researcher	Resting state corresponded to relatively constant beta band power AD state corresponded to increased beta band power Suppression state corresponded to decreased beta band power Movement patterns Muscle response Neural data Stimulus trains Classifier detections
Response/ pharmacodynamics (biological response to a therapeutic intervention)	Detect NDD response to an intervention (such as neuroprotective effects in HD treatment)	Detect changes in PD tremor and bradykinesia in response to levodopa medication using a wrist-worn accelerometer ⁸¹	Wrist-worn accelerometer Resting tremor and bradykinesia Researcher and participant	Amplitude of hand movements (amplitude and slowness) Smoothness of hand movements (hesitancy) Percentage of time spent with no hand movement (poverty or absence) Average length of bouts with no hand movement (poverty or absence)
Safety (likelihood or presence of intervention toxicity)	Assess potential adverse effects and risks associated with NDD treatments (such as risk/observation of muscle weakness in ALS treatments)	Identify bradykinesia fluctuations as a manifestation of a 'wearing-off' medication state in PD using a KinetiGraph ⁸²	PD KinetiGraph Bradykinesia and dyskinesia Participant, clinician, researcher	BKS Continuous BKS Median BKS Active BKS Median dyskinesia score Percentage time in tremor Percentage time in bradykinesia Percentage time in dyskinesia Dosage
Susceptibility/risk (potential for disease without intervention)	Identify specific hallmarks linked to a higher likelihood of developing NDD (such as repeated head injuries linked to CTE)	Detect postural and gait instability patterns associated with increased risk of PD and movement-related NDDs using wearable inertial sensors ⁴¹	Chest and leg-mounted IMUs Fall frequency, near-fall frequency, daily activities Participant	Frequency of lying down Number of ambulatory bouts Frequency of sitting Walking frequency Peak acceleration of the chest IMU Distribution of ambulatory bouts in time

Based on US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)–National Institutes of Health (NIH) Biomarkers, EndpointS and other Tools (BEST). It applies the FDA–NIH BEST classification system to digital biomarkers in neurodegenerative diseases (NDDs) and summarizes how these new measurements align with traditional biomarkers based on their intended clinical utility. Each row is a distinct biomarker category, and the columns provide further context with digital biomarker (DBM) examples specific to various NDDs, as well as technological implementation details such as the sensors used for data collection, the type of information collected and the users interacting with the sensors. AD, Alzheimer disease; ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis; BKS, Bradykinesia Score; CTE, chronic traumatic encephalopathy; DBS, deep brain stimulation; DNS, digital neurosignature; EEG, electroencephalogram; FTD, frontotemporal dementia; HD, Huntington disease; IMU, inertial measurement unit; MCI, mild cognitive impairment; PD, Parkinson disease; STN, subthalamic nucleus; VD, vascular dementia.

Box 1 | Translational considerations

Several regulatory pathways now guide the development and approval of digital biomarkers. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has established the [Digital Health Innovation Action Plan](#) and the Digital Health Software Precertification ([Pre-Cert](#)) programme, and supports the Clinical Trials Transformation Initiative for developing novel digital end points. The FDA–National Institutes of Health (NIH) Biomarkers, EndpointS and Other Tools (BEST) framework¹⁶ provides standardized terminology for classifying biomarker types across both traditional and digital domains. In Europe, the [European Medicines Agency Qualification of Novel Methodologies for Medicine Development](#) pathway offers a route for formal acceptance of digital measures in medicine development, whereas the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\) Evidence Standards Framework for Digital Health Technologies](#) outlines tiered evidence requirements for digital health technologies in the UK. The [Digital Medicine Society's V3 framework](#) (Verification, Analytical Validation, Clinical Validation) provides a structured methodology for determining whether a digital measure is fit for its intended purpose.

Nonetheless, proving clinical validity remains extremely challenging. Some digital biomarkers have achieved analytical validation for monitoring or diagnostic purposes; for example, [Empatica's Health Monitoring Platform](#) holds FDA 510(k) clearance for six digital biomarkers, including electrodermal activity, SpO₂, pulse rate and respiratory rate collected via a wrist-worn wearable. However, regulatory agencies are cautious when evaluating digital measures as primary efficacy end points, mirroring their scrutiny of traditional biomarkers that could be used to approve drugs that ultimately fail to deliver meaningful clinical benefits, as in the case of amyloid PET in Alzheimer disease receiving only “reasonably

likely surrogate endpoint” status after two decades of research³. Thus, even if a new drug gains approval based on one or two pivotal trials, a biomarker must clear a substantially higher evidentiary bar, requiring years of independent replication across multiple centres, populations, settings, device types, software versions and real-world conditions.

A central tension in this process is the ecological validity paradox: clinical ‘gold-standard’ assessments are conducted under controlled conditions that differ fundamentally from the uncontrolled free-living environments in which digital biomarkers operate. One proposed solution is stepwise validation, progressing from clinical gold-standard comparisons to deployable ‘silver standard’ references such as mobile polysomnography for real-world sleep staging.

For example, Stride Velocity 95th Centile (SV95C) for Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy¹⁵⁴ (an ankle-worn accelerometer-derived measure of stride velocity) was accepted by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) as a secondary and later primary end point in pivotal trials (NCT03039686, NCT05096221, NCT05524883). It took years of comprehensive clinical studies, including patient and caregiver surveys and healthcare professional perspectives, to validate that this digital measure correlated with gold-standard clinical assessments like the 6-minute walk distance test. Notably, despite SV95C demonstrating earlier sensitivity to disease progression, regulators classified it as a performance outcome assessment rather than a biomarker, probably because the act of walking itself constitutes the clinical outcome, rather than serving as a surrogate for an underlying biological process. This distinction highlights the nuanced regulatory boundaries that digital measures must navigate even after achieving clinical acceptance.

high-dimensional data streams that capture both macro-scale brain activity patterns and micro-level cognitive performance metrics.

Brain activity patterns. There are different approaches to monitoring brain activity patterns; electroencephalogram (EEG) is amongst the most popular and is a portable, non-invasive and low-cost diagnostic tool for measuring neural oscillations and event-related potentials associated with cognitive tasks. For example, a study of older adults at risk of dementia ($n = 100$) used machine learning algorithms to analyse prefrontal EEG activity and observed that slow intrinsic EEG oscillation is associated with MCI caused by Alzheimer disease²⁵. A similar study of older adults at risk of MCI ($n = 15$) identified multiscale entropy EEG patterns associated with dementia prognosis²⁶. Portable functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) systems provide complementary haemodynamic measurements for detecting altered brain connectivity and brain oxygenation that correlate with cognitive function in individuals with MCI²⁷. These biomarkers of brain activity require minimal patient effort compared to performance-based assessments. Wearable and portable magnetoencephalography systems are still emerging but could offer higher spatial resolution than EEG and other tools for detecting subtle changes in brain activity²⁸.

Cognitive response time. The time taken to respond to specific tasks, especially in gamified cognitive assessment apps, can indicate

cognitive decline or other neurodegenerative conditions²⁹. For example, the self-administered integrated cognitive assessment has been used to screen individuals at risk for Alzheimer disease ($n = 38$) by measuring cognitive impairment via a person's accuracy and response time in categorizing images (ISRCTN18112405)³⁰. The study found that integrated cognitive assessment performance correlated with elevated serum phosphorylated tau181 levels, which suggests that combining digital cognitive response time biomarkers with blood-based biomarkers, among other covariates, can modestly predict Alzheimer disease-related pathology. Additionally, an observational study of 15 individuals with PD-related freezing of gait revealed that impaired executive control (including lower attention) correlates with slower step execution in individuals with PD and freezing of gait³¹.

Eye tracking and movement. Devices that track eye movements can be used to diagnose and monitor conditions such as age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma and even certain neurological disorders, for example, in individuals with motor and verbal impairments³². Rapid eye movement (REM) patterns during daytime and sleep have also been associated with NDDs such as MCI, Alzheimer disease³³ and PD³⁴. In particular, in a prospective cohort with ~40 months of follow-up ($n = 213$ with MCI/prodromal Alzheimer disease; $n = 283$ cognitively normal/preclinical Alzheimer disease), a smartphone/tablet-based digital assessment (Altoidea DNS) using eye tracking showed high diagnostic discrimination

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(AUC 0.94 in MCI and 0.91 in cognitively normal at-risk participants)³³ (NCT02843529). An exploratory research study also tracked eye movement (initial response time) detected by a generic RGB camera to screen for dementia and other brain dysfunctions in a group of older adults ($n = 18$)³⁵. The study observed high measurement accuracy (root mean square error ≤ 0.028 s for older individuals), sufficient to detect the >0.1 s delay in initial response time characteristic of individuals with dementia.

Motor biomarkers

Motor biomarkers are measurable indicators of an individual's movement and coordination. They can be continuously monitored to better evaluate disease progression and other health conditions.

Speech, linguistic and vocal changes. Speech is a complex motor function that involves the coordination of multiple muscles and brain regions.

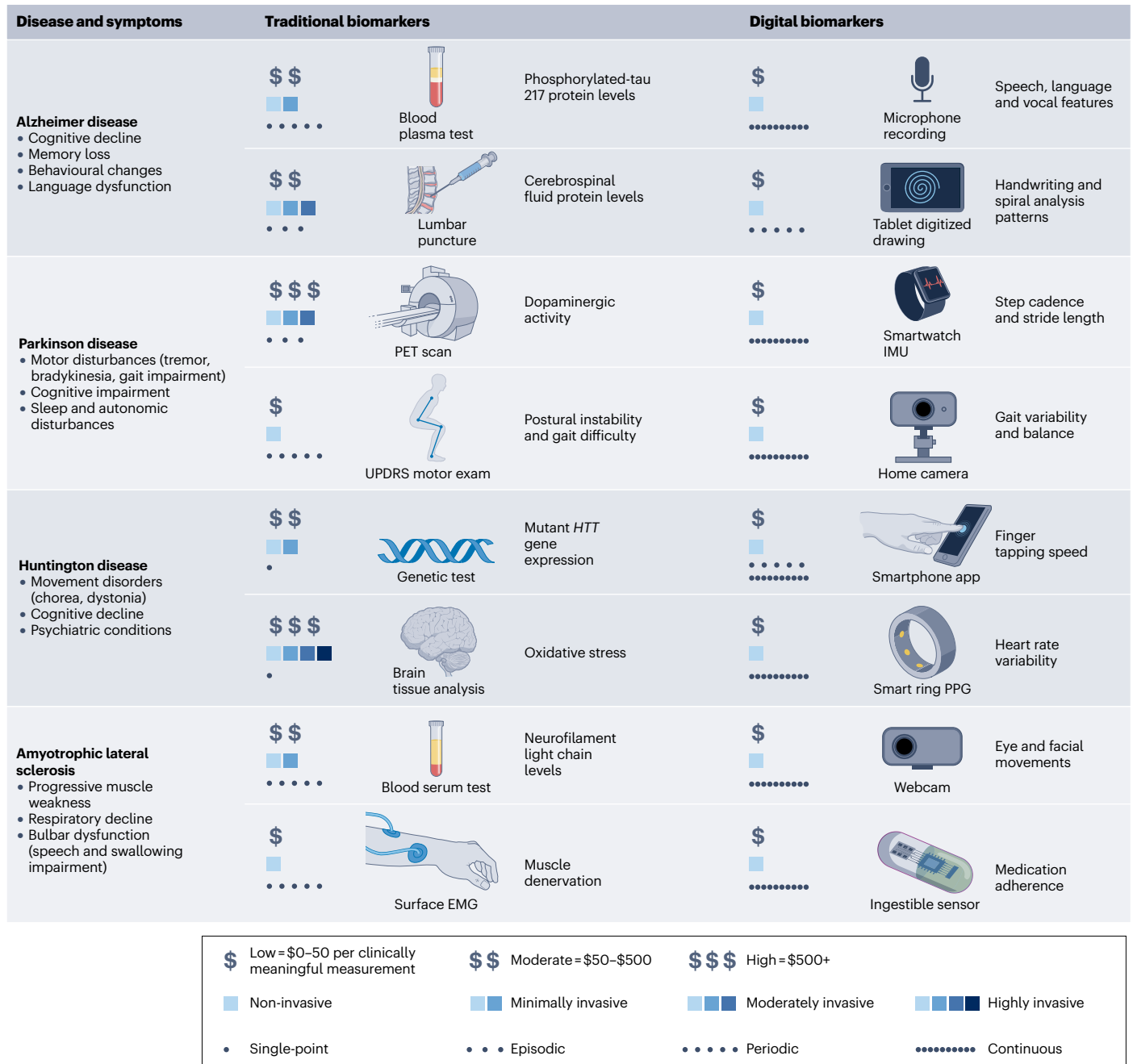


Fig. 3 | Comparison of traditional and digital biomarkers for neurodegenerative diseases. Traditional methods are characterized by invasive, costly and episodic measurements with variable outcomes, whereas digital approaches offer non-invasive, continuous, real-time data collection enhanced by artificial intelligence-

driven analytics for better clinical use. EMG, electromyography; IMU, inertial measurement unit; PPG, photoplethysmography; UPDRS, Unified Parkinson's Disease Rating Scale.

Impairment in speech, linguistic and vocal patterns, such as changes in pitch, volume, rate, syntax, semantics and articulation, can be early indicators of neurodegeneration (for example, articulation rate and averaged speaking time in people with amnesic MCI³⁶). In a multicentre study of individuals with PD ($n = 149$), microphone recordings were used to identify several speech biomarkers associated with PD, namely harsh voice, monotonic pitch and prolonged pauses³⁷. These speech biomarkers could differentiate both prodromal (idiopathic REM sleep behaviour disorder) and early-stage PD from healthy controls with up to 72% sensitivity. Similarly, machine learning algorithms have been used to derive speech and voice biomarkers (such as spontaneous speech and lexical-semantic patterns) as non-invasive methods for early Alzheimer disease detection³⁸, cognitive impairment progression³⁹ and multi-linguistic patterns in PD⁴⁰, with promising results.

Gait, balance and speed. Gait, the manner of walking, balance and speed are also important motor biomarkers that can provide valuable information about neurological and musculoskeletal health. Gait impairment features, such as slower walking speed, shorter stride length and increased variability in step timing, are common DBMs in NDDs and can be detected through wearable sensors^{41,42}, vision-based sensors^{43–45} and contactless sensors^{46,47}. For passive remote monitoring of Alzheimer disease, smart carpet sensors have been used to extract gait parameters and detect fall risk with high accuracy (95% sensitivity, 85% specificity) in a feasibility study of nine individuals with Alzheimer disease⁴⁸. Another study used a low-cost durable mat and smartphone camera to estimate gait impairment patterns such as freezing of gait, reduced stride length and lower step velocity in an investigative study of 44 people with PD⁴⁹. The stride length measurement captured by the study showed a mean absolute error of 0.62 cm, which is comparable with the ‘gold standard’ walking mat system **GAITRite**.

Handwriting and finger tapping dynamics. Handwriting dynamics, including the speed, pressure and rhythm of writing, are informative motor biomarkers for diseases such as PD. Differences in geometrical writing patterns, velocity-based patterns and kinematic-based movement patterns from handwriting and drawing tasks collected from graphic tablets, smartphones and other devices can help diagnose PD^{50–52}. For example, a diagnostic pen with a soft magnetoelastic tip and ferrofluid ink was used to measure on-surface and in-air writing motions to diagnose PD in a pilot human study ($n = 16$)⁵⁰. Similarly, combining finger tapping, voice and gait parameters extracted from multimodal sensors in 6,418 individuals with and without PD revealed that models using the tapping coordinates (AUC 0.933) outperformed both gait/rest-based and voice-based models from the same cohort, and the assembled multimodal model (AUC 0.944) outperformed patient self-reported symptom scores⁵¹. Touchscreen dynamic typing can also be used to detect a decline in fine motor skills in people with early-stage PD⁵².

Facial expression and oculomotor movement. Facial expression analysis using computer vision techniques can identify reduced facial expressiveness, a symptom associated with several NDD conditions, often referred to as facial masking (hypomimia) in PD⁵³. For example, a contactless video-based system and computer vision algorithms enabled automatic analysis of facial expressions and revealed how individuals with PD ($n = 17$) had difficulty acting (that is, making up) and imitating facial gestures upon request⁵⁴. Smartphone cameras can also detect hypomimia as a self-screening tool for PD⁵⁵ as abnormalities in

eye movement (such as saccadic dysmetria, smooth pursuit deficits or nystagmus) have been closely linked with Alzheimer disease³² and PD³³. Similarly, video-based eye-tracking DHTs have been used for earlier detection of MCI⁵⁶, to distinguish between people with PD and healthy individuals⁵⁷, and to better predict PD motor and cognitive scores⁵⁸. The ViewMind DBM was developed to detect MCI progression to Alzheimer disease ($n = 65$ individuals with MCI) by drawing cognitive-related patterns of eye movement while participants perform a visual short-term memory binding task³².

Behavioural biomarkers

Beyond physiological measures, behaviours, daily routines, and mental and emotional states can also be hallmarks of NDD conditions.

Sleep activity and quality. Sleep has a role in cognitive function, mood regulation and overall health. Wearable inertial sensors⁵⁸, bed sensors^{46,59} and environmental sensors^{60,61} are being tested for less invasive monitoring of sleep disorders and abnormal movements in individuals with NDD. These technologies aim to assess sleep quality, detect disturbances and analyse abnormal motions during sleep. A pilot study of seven people with PD used the **Emerald device** (a radio-wave home sensor to passively track time in bed, among other measures) and observed high day-to-day variability in comparison to healthy controls⁴⁶.

Physical activity. Sedentary behaviour is a risk factor for numerous conditions, from depression to dementia. A cross-sectional study of individuals with PD ($n = 96$) used an actigraph to conclude that those who met World Health Organization recommendations for 150 weekly minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity showed better cognition and higher functional brain connectivity compared to less active people⁶². Similarly, clinical trials like EngagePD and Preactive-PD have leveraged actigraphs to monitor changes in motor and cognitive function in individuals with PD in response to physical activity interventions (NCT03696589, NCT04922190). These results suggest that physical activity can be a candidate biomarker for cognitive and functional decline associated with PD.

Mood and emotion tracking. Devices equipped with automated facial recognition⁶³, voice analysis algorithms³⁶ or human–computer interactions² can detect micro-expressions, tonal changes or behaviour profiles linked to specific moods or emotions⁶⁴ in Alzheimer disease, MCI and dementia. PD Manager is a mobile health platform that monitors mood fluctuations (among other DBMs) associated with PD to assist patients in actively managing their disease⁶⁵.

Stress levels. Psychological stress is a well-established risk factor for various mental and physical health problems, including NDDs⁶⁶. Various markers, such as cortisol levels⁶⁶, galvanic skin response (electrodermal activity or skin conductance)⁶⁷, heart rate variability⁶⁸ and voice markers³⁶, can indicate stress levels. Wearable devices can continuously monitor these indicators; for example, a wrist-worn device consisting of a galvanic skin response sensor revealed a correlation between sensor-derived stress measurements and clinical staff observations in six nursing home residents with dementia, with accuracy up to 75.9% using personalized stress level thresholds from the device⁶⁷.

Physiological biomarkers

Physiological biomarkers directly measure body functions and reflect the operational status of an individual’s physiological systems.

Heart rate and blood pressure. Heart rate and blood pressure serve as key indicators of stress, cardiovascular health and overall cardiac function. Wearable devices and smart patches have facilitated continuous monitoring of these parameters for conditions like MCI⁶⁹ and PD⁷⁰. For example, a wrist-worn device combined with machine learning detected circadian disruptions in sleep and motor functions in a cross-sectional study of 12 individuals with PD and age-matched controls. External sensor devices within an in-home Internet of Things system could also be used to detect blood pressure variations during daily activities⁷¹.

Respiration rate. Changes in respiration or breathing rate can signal respiratory distress, anxiety disorders and metabolic dysfunction. Radio-wave and other passive sensors have been used to monitor respiratory patterns associated with PD and dementia such as irregular breathing rhythms and sleep-disordered breathing^{60,72}. For instance, ultra-wideband impulse radars can unobtrusively monitor and reconstruct nocturnal respiration rate patterns in 47 individuals with Alzheimer disease⁷². Contact-based and contactless sensors, such as smart garments and chest bands, can also be used to capture respiration features⁷³. A study of 95 community-dwelling older adults ($n = 33$ with amnesic MCI) identified a novel sleep biometric, the time latency associated with the tight gap between sleep movements and respiratory coupling, to distinguish diagnosed MCI versus normal cognition with 87% sensitivity⁷⁴.

Environmental biomarkers

Environmental signals could also provide clinically relevant information in the context of NDDs.

Ambient light. The quality and quantity of light exposure have important roles in mood disorders and sleep quality; for example, nocturnal blue light exposure increases the risk of insomnia⁷⁵. A pilot study validated an ambulatory circadian monitoring device that integrates light exposure sensors, wrist temperature, actimetry, and body position to detect sleep–wake states in individuals with PD ($n = 15$) and found substantially reduced sleep efficiency, lower total sleep time and worse circadian functioning compared to age-matched controls ($n = 15$)⁷⁶. Additionally, a meta-analysis of older adults with dementia found that light therapy improves sleep quality and reduces nocturnal behavioural restlessness⁷⁷.

Location tracking. Location patterns offer many insights into a person's behaviour, such as the complexity of typical daily routines and their level of independence. For example, a GPS-based lower-limb ambulatory sensor to detect voice, activity and location monitoring enabled profiling of modifiable lifestyle risk factors related to Alzheimer disease and related dementia such as social and geographic activity⁷⁸. Location eigenbehaviour (that is, the structure in indoor location information routines obtained from contactless ambient sensors) and GPS driving tracking have also been proposed as DBMs for detecting cognitive levels and preclinical Alzheimer disease in older adults^{79,80}.

Categorization by sensing technologies

A sensor is a device, module, machine or subsystem that detects physical phenomena or environmental changes and produces an output signal to communicate this information. We propose sensing as an umbrella term referring to the modality in which DHTs acquire (or sense)

data (Fig. 1a). This section provides an overview of various sensing modalities, including wearable, portable, inner-body, and ambient and contactless sensors (Fig. 4 and Table 2).

Wearable sensors

Body-worn inertial and optical devices. Wearable sensors positioned on the chest, upper limb (such as forearm, wrist or finger), trunk (waist) and lower limb (such as thigh, calf or ankle) are the most prevalent sensing devices for obtaining DBMs owing to their low cost, convenience and versatility. These devices can capture motor function, sleep patterns and cardiovascular function^{25,26,69}.

Inertial measurement units (IMUs), consisting of accelerometers and gyroscopes, are instrumental for measuring the motor impairment features (such as tremors, gait disturbances and bradykinesia) that are hallmarks of various NDDs that emerge at varying stages of disease progression^{41,42,81–83}, for example, at early stages in PD and multiple sclerosis, and often later in Alzheimer disease⁸⁴. IMUs are commonly placed on the wrist, ankle, trunk or lower back, depending on what is being measured and the signal-to-noise ratio, with wrist placement being the most common owing to user comfort. Feet and waist-mounted IMUs can measure gait variability and balance ability in individuals with Alzheimer disease, revealing increased stance and swing time, and larger average sway speed compared to healthy individuals⁸⁴. In an age-matched, medium-sized study of individuals with multiple sclerosis ($n = 44$) and healthy controls, a small, body-fixed inertial sensor (Axivity AX3) was placed on the lower back of participants to measure physical activity and real-world, community ambulation for a week⁸³ (NCT02427997). Their findings revealed reduced gait speed, cadence and complexity (sample entropy) compared to controls, as well as lower physical activity levels, particularly in the free-living community ambulation settings.

Actigraphy is used for evaluating sleep changes, such as insomnia and excessive daytime sleepiness, which are known markers that precede motor and cognitive NDD symptoms^{62,85}. Actigraphs are devices integrated with accelerometers and other ambient sensors that monitor changes in physical motion, for example, to quantify restless sleep. Although the gold standard for sleep monitoring is polysomnography measured via video or EEG, actigraphs provide similar measurements, can be easily placed on various body positions, and are convenient for routine and at-home use⁸⁶. In a randomized controlled trial of the LOCK sleep intervention (NCT04533815), wrist-worn actigraphy measured total sleep time changes in nursing home residents with Alzheimer disease and related dementias ($n = 23$) as a primary end point⁸⁵.

PPG and optical sensing devices are other prevalent wearables primarily used to measure cardiovascular and autonomic dysfunction in NDDs^{86,87}. PPG sensors harness light-emitting diodes and photodetectors to capture blood volume changes in microvascular tissue and measure heart rate, heart rate variability, blood oxygen saturation and pulse wave velocity⁸⁸. These sensors are typically located in wrist-worn devices like smartwatches^{89,90} or finger-mounted configurations, such as smart rings⁸⁷, owing to better vascular access and reduced motion artefact. Similar to sleep disturbances, autonomic dysfunction manifests early in disease progression (such as in PD), often preceding preclinical symptoms by years. For example, an at-home, wrist-worn smartwatch with PPG sensors was used to associate resting heart rate during day and night with the Unified Parkinson's Disease Rating Scale (UPDRS) Part 1b scores (assessing non-motor experiences of daily living such as sleep and fatigue) in a large longitudinal study in individuals with PD ($n = 484$)⁹¹. The study revealed increasing resting heart rate

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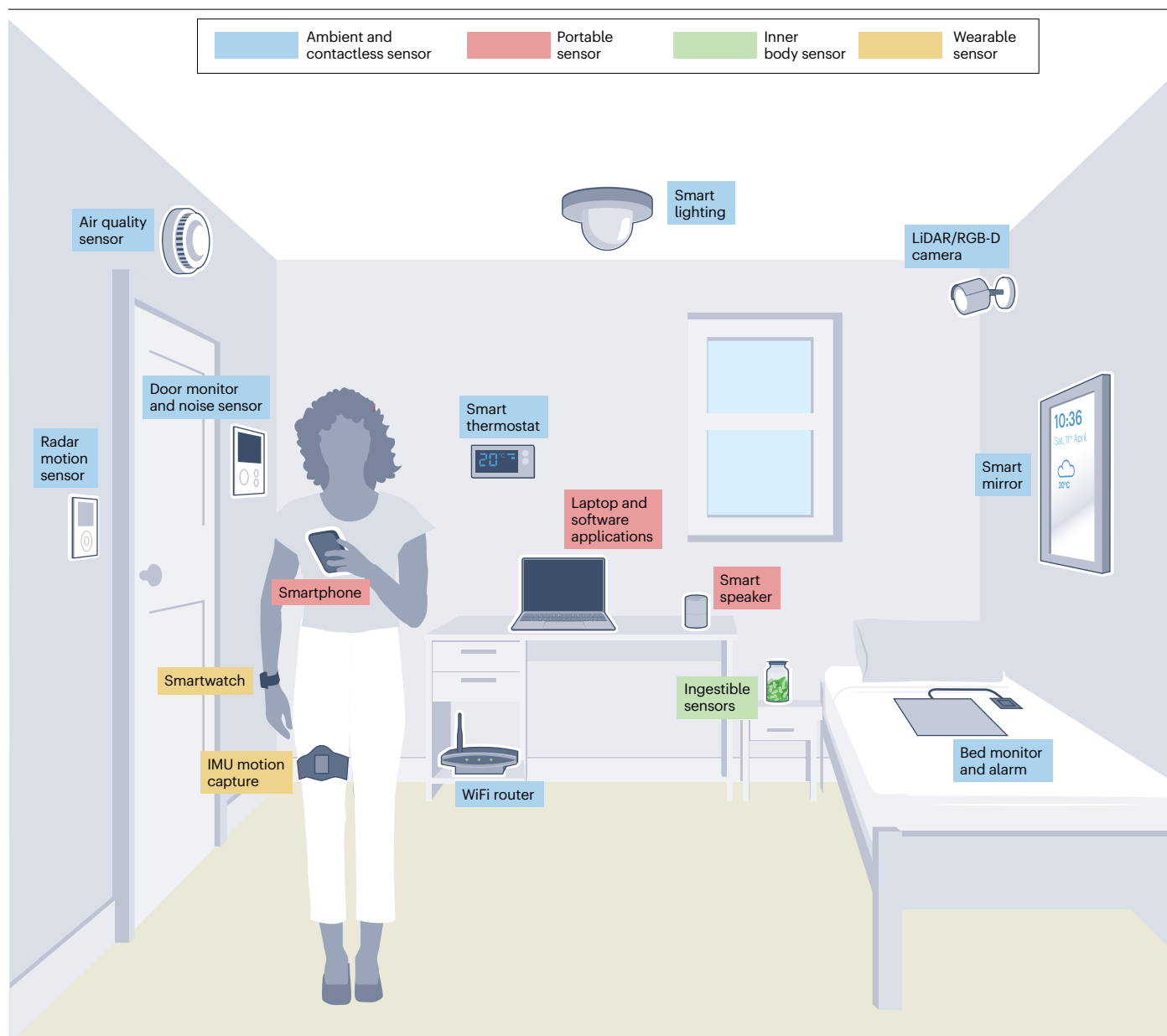


Fig. 4 | Different types of sensing modalities. Wearables, portables, inner-body, ambient and contactless. IMU, inertial measurement unit; LiDAR, light detection and ranging.

with the scores during day and night, using discriminative machine learning classifiers with over 93% accuracy. Similarly, finger-mounted PPG sensors⁸⁷, such as the Oura ring (Oura Health Ltd, Oulu, Finland) and wireless pulse oximeters, can reliably estimate nocturnal heart rate and heart rate variability and distinguish between individuals with MCI and healthy controls ($n = 31$, classification accuracy 90%) in alignment with the gold-standard electrocardiography⁹².

Electronic textiles. Electronic textiles (e-textiles) or smart clothing can integrate electronic components into the fabric to track symptoms of NDD conditions such as chronic pain in Alzheimer disease and sensory

deprivation in dementia^{93,94}. For example, sensorized shirts have been used to detect heart rate and respiratory rate in PD patients for wellness monitoring⁷⁰, and smart headbands such as MUSE can extract EEG signals that are coupled with fine motor control analysis to diagnose MCI⁹⁵ and for early-onset prognosis of possible dementia⁹⁶. In addition, IMUs have been mounted on belts and bands worn on limbs to predict symptoms such as bradykinesia or reduced physical activity in individuals with NDDs⁴². Similarly, bracelets embedded with inertial sensors have been used to track physical movements to detect hand tremors and bradykinesia in individuals with PD⁹⁷. In a more complex example, a smart sleep mask with integrated physiological sensors,

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Table 2 | Digital health sensing technologies for neurodegenerative disease monitoring

Sensing technology	Advantages	Disadvantages	Maturity	User friction
(W) Body-worn inertial measurement units ^{41,42,81–84}	Continuous motion tracking Small and lightweight Proven validity for varied biomechanics	Sensor drift Require alignment and calibration Placement influences accuracy Susceptible to noise Limited context	TRL 8–9: Mature	Daily charging Consistent placement needed Compliance Independent donning/doffing Aesthetics
(W) Wrist-based actigraphy ^{62,85}	Prolonged sleep monitoring Strong correlation with sleep measures Longer battery life	Less precise for sleep staging Environmental confounders Limited physiological data	TRL 8–9+: Mature and clinically active	Wrist discomfort Skin irritation Software maintenance Aesthetics Device durability Minimal user feedback
(W) Photoplethysmography rings/watches ^{86–92}	Continuous heart rate/heart rate variability Small form factor	Skin tone bias Motion artefacts Temperature sensitivity	TRL 7–8: Mature	Finger swelling Limited battery life Comfort and fit Notification fatigue
(W) Smartwatches ^{86,89,90}	Multimodal sensing High acceptance Existing ecosystem Emergency assistance Direct user feedback	Proprietary algorithms Inter-device variability Power consumption Dependent on connectivity	TRL 7–8: Ready	Daily charging Skin irritation Environmental conditions Information overload Lifestyle compatibility
(W) Electronic textiles (e-textiles/smart clothing) ^{42,70,93–98}	Unobtrusive integration Larger, multimodal sensing area Higher comfort and wearability Customization	Washing durability Connectivity dependence Power consumption Flexibility Hardware–textile integration	TRL 5–6: Emerging	Limited clothing/designs Washability Physical wear Stretchability and bending
(W) Electronic skin patches ^{99–101}	Localized, targeted measurements Flexible Single-use Discreet form factor Multimodal sensing	Adhesive degradation Sweat interference Disposable components Biocompatibility Stretchability Thickness	TRL 5–7: Trials	Skin irritation/allergies Limited reusability Hygiene and maintenance Water resistance Placement
(W) Ear and eye devices (wearables/smart glasses) ^{102–104}	Socially acceptable Multimodal sensing Stability Vestibular and balance monitoring Discreet form factor	Few channels Ear variance Cerumen Power management Motion and acoustic interference Sensor crosstalk	TRL 4–5: Research	Ear fatigue Hygiene Audio interference Occlusion effect Weight and pressure points Heat and irritation
(P) Smartphones ^{102,104,105} (P) Tablets ^{36,103}	Ubiquitous Multi-sensor Local processing User engagement and feedback Large display Longer battery life Accessibility Multi-user	Battery drain Operating system limits Bring-your-own-device variance Environmental interference Less portable Limited sensor suite Hardware variability	TRL 7–8: Mature	Battery anxiety Privacy Carrying and placement Compliance Accessibility Size/weight Shared device Inconsistent availability Ergonomics
(I) Ingestibles (smart pills) ^{106–108}	Direct gastrointestinal access Medication adherence Novel gut–brain axis markers	Single-use Limited transmission Variable transit time Biocompatibility	TRL 4–5: Early	Swallowing Psychological discomfort Bowel preparation Limited reuse
(I) Implantables ^{109–112}	Continuous, internal signals High signal fidelity Therapeutic capability	Minimally invasive Biocompatibility Stability Device miniaturization	TRL 3–6: Research	Surgery Infection risk Limited flexibility Scarring

Table 2 (continued) | Digital health sensing technologies for neurodegenerative disease monitoring

Sensing technology	Advantages	Disadvantages	Maturity	User friction
(A/C) Vision-based (cameras) ^{43–45,113}	Contactless Multiple people	Lighting Occlusion Computation	TRL 6–7: Clinical	Privacy Fixed install Blind spots
(A/C) Infrared light/radiation (fNIRS/PIR) ^{10,46,58,114,115}	Passive Years-long battery	Low resolution Environmental interference	TRL 8–9: Ready	Installation Room-specific
(A/C) LiDAR ¹⁶	Precise 3D maps Privacy-preserving	Limited field of view Computation	TRL 5–6: Emerging	Installation Coverage planning
(A/C) Environmental (air quality, noise, light and temperature) ^{76,117–120}	Contextual information Shared environment monitoring Internet of Things integration	Indirect measurement Multi-occupancy Calibration needs	TRL 7–8: Mature	Multiple devices Network setup Maintenance
(A/C) Radio-wave (ultra-wideband/mmWave) radar ^{59–61,72,121}	Privacy-preserving Through-wall	Signal processing Multi-occupancy	TRL 5–6: Emerging	Installation WiFi interference
(A/C) Bed/sleep sensors ^{46,59}	Unobtrusive Partner data	User distinction Motion transfer	TRL 6–7: Commercial	Bed-specific Portability

Sensing categories: (W) wearable, (P) portable, (I) inner body, (A/C) ambient/contactless. Technology Readiness Level (TRL; 1–2: basic research, 2–4: preclinical research, 6: phase I trials; 7: phase II trials, 8: phase III trials, 9: phase IV trials and deployment). fNIRS, functional near-infrared spectroscopy; LiDAR, light detection and ranging; PIR, passive infrared motion.

such as triaxial accelerometers, a respiratory acoustic sensor and an eye movement sensor, was developed to monitor eye movement frequency, direction and amplitude during sleep as candidate DBMs for NDDs⁹⁸. Nonetheless, e-textiles are still not common because integrating reliable electronics into flexible, washable fabrics presents considerable manufacturing challenges. Sensor performance can degrade with repeated use and fabric wear and tear, embedded components complicate laundering and maintenance, and production costs remain higher than for conventional wearables.

Electronic skin patches and body network sensors. Electronic skin patches are wearable-like devices that adhere directly to the skin. Although they could be equipped with conventional IMUs, they are particularly suited to measuring electrophysiological signals, including EEG, electrooculography, electromyography, electrocardiography and bodily fluids such as sweat. In an exploratory, pilot study ($n = 25$), the NIMBLE biosensor skin patch, which contains an accelerometer and EMG sensors, was placed on various locations on the body to record movements at home and in the clinic in patients with PD⁹⁹. Results revealed a correlation between clinically observed and sensor algorithm-predicted UPDRS motor symptom assessment scores with predicted scores within a ± 1 range 91% of the time. Similarly, a wearable, microfluidic patch-work was developed for near real-time continuous measurement of at-rest thermoregulatory sweat composition and rate on various body sites¹⁰⁰. Tested in a feasibility study with four participants, the device tracked sweat secretion and sweat levodopa, the primary treatment for PD. Temporary-tattoo EEGs can also be used to identify sleep behaviour disorders in individuals with NDDs¹⁰¹.

Portable sensors

Smartphones and tablets. Smartphones and tablets have built-in sensors that offer a platform for collecting a variety of digital measures, including accelerometer, GPS, microphone and other sensor-derived metrics, to monitor different health-related behaviours and cognitive functions². In this Review, we do not explicitly focus on ‘active’ tasks, which make up most smartphone-based use cases and often enable instrumented assessments. Instead, we emphasize what has been

measurable in ‘passive’ everyday settings, as these measurements capture more natural behaviours with no additional user burden, allow for continuous data collection without requiring sustained compliance from patients who could experience cognitive or motor difficulties, and offer the most clinically viable approach for early detection and longitudinal monitoring as diseases progress. For example, smartphone typing and tablet handwriting or drawing dynamics can be measured to monitor fine motor decline in individuals with PD and MCI^{102,103}. Similarly, speech samples collected from smartphones and tablets can help distinguish healthy individuals from those with MCI³⁶ and detect subtypes of primary progressive aphasia and frontotemporal dementia¹⁰⁴. Additionally, DBMs of cognitive performance in personalized games have been repeatedly used to detect PD¹⁰⁵, which could be considered passive tasks owing to their entertainment component. Overall, smartphones and tablets are powerful for collecting longitudinal, high-frequency data that reflect fluctuating symptoms in real-world settings. This data will be especially useful as complementary information to traditional clinical assessments and more detailed patient monitoring between clinical visits.

Inner-body sensors

Ingestible sensors. Ingestible sensors are non-invasive electronic devices, often designed as pills or capsules (digital medicine systems) that can be swallowed and activated to release a solution or mechanism within the gastrointestinal tract^{106–108}. This approach comes with direct access to measure otherwise hard-to-obtain quantities throughout the gastrointestinal tract, such as pH, temperature and pressure, while taking images of the passage. For example, an ingestible pill was used to monitor and transmit core body temperature dysregulation in individuals with PD ($n = 12$) experiencing REM sleep behaviour disorder symptoms¹⁰⁶. The study revealed that people with PD showed reduced core body temperature patterns that correlate with REM sleep behaviour disorder severity.

Ingestibles are commonly used to administer medication and monitor medication adherence in patients, whereby the sensor is co-encapsulated with the medication and transmits a signal upon dissolution in the stomach. The FDA recently approved the first ingestible

sensor (MIND1) with aripiprazole, **Abilify MyCite**, for individuals with dementia-related psychosis (NCT02219009). Its performance was compared alongside a wearable sensor and mobile application for medication management in a medium-sized study ($n = 67$) of individuals with schizophrenia¹⁰⁷. Over half of participants could independently pair and apply the patch by the end of the study, which suggests improvements in usability. Ingestible sensors are also being used in NDDs to monitor the gut–brain axis, a new area of research that links gut dynamics (such as motility and dysbiosis) to conditions such as PD¹⁰⁸.

Implantable sensors. Implantable sensors are surgically placed inside the body to continuously monitor specific health parameters. We specifically refer to implantable sensors that can be used in at-home settings for tracking everyday activities such as implantable brain–computer (or brain–machine) interfaces, neuroprostheses and cardioverter-defibrillators. Although brain–computer interfaces have been used to administer clinical interventions for long-term cognitive decline^{109,110} or to analyse and interpret brain signals into useful commands that can replace lost function¹¹¹, they are not actively being used as DBMs for disease monitoring. As an example, a minimally invasive, degradable, implantable ultrasound metagel sensor was used for monitoring intracranial biomarkers in vivo, such as pressure, temperature, pH and blood flow velocity, to identify the onset and progression of NDDs associated with injuries like chronic traumatic encephalopathy¹¹².

Ambient and contactless sensors

Ambient sensors often operate in the background and are integrated into an individual's surrounding environment to collect and infer passive data. Once installed, ambient sensors require very little maintenance and are therefore less affected by limited patient adherence.

Moreover, they are applicable in cases where a person might not be able to reliably maintain most other types of devices such as during later stages of various NDDs.

Vision-based sensors. Although not commonly used at home owing to privacy concerns (Box 2) and limitations with environment illumination, vision-based sensors, such as RGB-depth cameras, infrared, thermal, and light detection and ranging (LiDAR) sensors provide a non-intrusive, low-cost modality of ambient sensing that captures high-resolution, visual data from the environment, including gait and posture^{43–45,113}. Portable fNIRS systems have been widely used to assess brain function in individuals with MCI^{114,115}. For example, fNIRS and gait measurements revealed that an MCI cohort ($n = 57$) exhibited lower activation in the primary motor cortex, secondary motor cortex and parietal brain regions compared to the healthy group during the motor execution stage of a prepared walking task¹¹⁴. Similarly, assessment of gait impairment via an fNIRS device in a dual-task walking experiment revealed substantial between-group variability ($n = 16$ cognitively impaired; $n = 38$ cognitively healthy) on functional connectivity strength change values and region-of-interest connection strength change values¹¹⁵. Additionally, LiDAR technology, which uses light in the form of a pulsed laser to measure distances, has been used to create precise 2D and 4D maps of the environment to detect gait parameters from usual walking patterns to predict the risk of falls and neurocognitive performance in older adults¹¹⁶. This accuracy enables a detailed assessment of physical activity and coordination, which can be valuable for detecting early signs of neurodegenerative disorders.

Other ambient and smart environment sensors. Since the mid-2010s, simple passive infrared motion sensors to detect activity in equipped

Box 2 | Data considerations

Digital biomarker development generates sensitive health data that falls under regulatory frameworks such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in the USA and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe. However, a critical gap persists where most early-stage digital biomarker research occurs in academic or pilot settings without rigorous privacy oversight, and protections are often retrofitted rather than built in from the start. Addressing this limitation requires privacy-by-design principles, an approach in which data protection is embedded into the architecture of a system from its inception, rather than added as an afterthought. In practice, this means adopting data minimization (collecting only what is strictly necessary), on-device processing where feasible and dynamic consent management systems that allow participants to adjust their data-sharing preferences as studies evolve.

Algorithmic fairness presents equally pressing concerns. Machine learning models trained on data that underrepresent marginalized communities risk encoding and amplifying existing health disparities. Populations without reliable digital access might be excluded entirely, and algorithms that fail to account for social determinants of health can produce systematically biased outputs. These risks are not hypothetical; for example, in Parkinson disease, women more commonly present with dyskinesias and depression, while men more often exhibit rigidity¹⁵⁶. This illustrates how demographic

differences can confound models that treat patient populations as homogeneous. Mitigating these biases requires algorithmic impact assessments across demographic subgroups, community advisory boards with diverse stakeholder representation, and disaggregated performance reporting by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and digital literacy.

Transparency in reporting is essential for building trust and enabling independent scrutiny. Studies should document detailed participant demographics, including language proficiency and digital literacy, stratified model performance metrics, and inclusion/exclusion criteria alongside their equity implications. Where possible, researchers should release open-source code and synthetic datasets to facilitate independent validation and provide plain-language summaries accessible to patient communities. Several frameworks and checklists support these goals, including the [National Institute for Health Care and Excellence \(NICE\) Evidence Standards Framework for Digital Health Technologies](#), the [Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials–Artificial Intelligence \(CONSORT-AI\)](#)¹⁵⁷, the [Standard Protocol Items: Recommendations for Interventional Trials \(SPIRIT-AI\) reporting guidelines](#)¹⁵⁸, the [Minimum Information about Clinical Artificial Intelligence Modelling \(MI-CLAIM\) checklist](#)¹⁵⁹, and the [Transparent Reporting of a multivariable prediction model for Individual Prognosis Or Diagnosis \(TRIPOD+AI\) checklist](#)^{160,161}.

rooms or door contact sensors to detect opening and closing patterns in individuals with MCI and Alzheimer disease have been used^{10,46,58}. These sensors can extract a wide array of potential DBMs, including gait speed and physical activity measured during clinical visits or at home. Sleep or presence sensors placed near or under the bed accurately and unobtrusively quantify sleep-related and movement markers such as sleep duration or heart rate patterns during sleep that can be associated with MCI and Alzheimer disease⁵⁸. Noise, air quality, light and ambient room temperature sensors also hold clinical relevance for NDD populations. Long-term community noise exposure has been associated with a higher risk of both MCI and Alzheimer disease in older adults¹¹⁷ whereas inadequate ambient light disrupts circadian rhythms and exacerbates behavioural symptoms in individuals with dementia^{76,118}. Indoor environmental quality sensors monitoring temperature, humidity and air quality can be integrated into Internet of Things systems to unobtrusively track daily living and improve care for individuals with MCI¹¹⁹, and similar applications in dementia care facilities have shown utility in detecting conditions that may worsen symptoms or compromise safety¹²⁰. Additionally, radio-wave-based sensors like ultra-wideband and millimetre-wave (mmWave) radar (low-cost privacy-preserving sensors that emit radio waves to detect motion and body position without cameras) have been deployed in at-home settings to recognize nocturnal breathing patterns and daily human activities such as walking^{72,121}. In a year-long observational study of 50 participants, passively monitored gait speed from radio waves correlated strongly with MDS-UPDRS Part III scores, declined nearly twice as fast in individuals with PD versus controls, and captured intraday medication response fluctuations⁶¹. A large, cross-sectional study including individuals with PD ($n = 25$) used a contactless, low-power, wireless radio device to collect radio signals from the environment and extract nocturnal breathing signals. Using one night of nocturnal breathing signals analysed with an artificial intelligence model could predict PD with an AUC of 0.906 and a sensitivity of 86.23%, as well as a strong correlation between the model's severity prediction and the MDS-UPDRS Part III ($r = 0.93$)⁶⁰. Similar radio-signal-based sensors, such as the Emerald Device, are also being explored to monitor gait, home activity and time in bed in the context of PD⁵⁹.

Categorization by utility and application

DBMs can redefine health care by providing precise, personalized and timely data. Their applications span various domains, such as improving treatment optimization, enabling personalized medicine, and ensuring continuous at-home, remote and clinical monitoring (Fig. 1).

Treatment optimization

DBMs can directly optimize treatment by transforming episodic symptom reports into time-resolved measures that map onto actionable decisions such as medication timing, dose adjustment, therapy selection or trigger-based interventions. For instance, in PD, wrist-worn devices such as the Parkinson KinetiGraph or Personal KinetiGraph (PKG) quantify longitudinal bradykinesia, dyskinesia, tremor, fluctuations and sleep-related features outside the clinic, which allows clinicians to distinguish 'wearing-off' patterns from baseline impairment and to adjust levodopa schedules accordingly^{82,122}. In an observational study of people with PD ($n = 70$), PKG review changed the initial treatment plan in 31.8% of participants, and clinician assessment frequently differed from PKG-derived profiles for bradykinesia/wearing-off, dyskinesia and sleep¹²². In a separate routine-care report, PKG data contributed to treatment changes in a large fraction of visits/patients (reported

as 84% of visits and 79% of patients in that clinic cohort), highlighting how DBMs can shift management beyond what is inferred from a short exam and self-report alone¹²³.

DBM-informed optimization is also well suited for semi-automated care pathways. For example, continuous monitoring can support standardized escalation rules (for example, sustained increases in bradykinesia burden or dyskinesia time) that prompt clinician review and shorten delays between symptom worsening and treatment adjustment. In cognitive decline, performance-based DBMs derived from computerized cognitive tasks (such as reaction time distributions, error profiles, learning curves and fatigue slopes)¹²⁴ can similarly be used to adapt training intensity and content, enabling protocols to be titrated to the individual's response rather than delivered as a fixed 'dose' (this is consistent with the broader concept of DBMs enabling tailored, longitudinal monitoring and treatment).

Personalized medicine using artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence-enabled DBMs can help support the transition to personalized medicine and to better understand and treat complex neurological conditions. At its core, this integration enables what has been termed 'deep phenotyping' – the extraction of fine-grained, longitudinal phenotypic components that describe how disease manifests and evolves within a specific individual rather than an 'average' patient^{125,126}. In NDDs, this is particularly valuable because clinical syndromes are heterogeneous across motor and non-motor domains, and progression trajectories vary substantially. A practical instantiation of 'deep phenotyping' is now feasible with commodity devices like the WATCH-PD study, a multicentre observational effort showing that a commercially available smartwatch paired with a smartphone research application can quantify key motor and non-motor features in early, untreated PD¹²⁷. The study captured longitudinal motor (such as tremor, gait and arm movement) and non-motor features (such as speech and cognitive tasks) in people with early, untreated PD ($n = 82$) and monitored patient-specific trajectories over 12 months.

Personalized medicine applications can also integrate DBMs with high-dimensional biological and health-system data to refine risk estimation and therapeutic matching¹²⁵. At the systems level, artificial intelligence-enabled precision medicine platforms (for example, Helix's clinical interpretation stack; Syapse, now within N-Power Medicine) show how genomic or real-world evidence infrastructures can be paired with digital measures to stratify risk and guide individualized care or research pathways¹²⁸.

Adverse events and safety monitoring

DBMs support safety monitoring by enabling continuous, remote detection of clinically meaningful risk states and by shortening the time between risk escalation and intervention¹⁰. In older adults and people living with NDDs, unobtrusive wearables and ambient sensors can track safety-relevant functions, such as gait stability, turning smoothness and activity fragmentation, without requiring frequent clinic visits³⁰. Safety monitoring becomes materially more important when DBMs are tied to predictive signals and actionable care pathways. In the ISAAC and ORCATECH living laboratory studies, unobtrusive in-home assessment of walking speed was evaluated for identifying future falls ($n = 125$)¹²⁹. Results demonstrated how continuous gait-speed trajectories can function as an early warning signal that supports proactive interventions (for example, home safety modifications, physical therapy referral, and medication review) before an adverse event occurs. In NDDs, analogous approaches can be extended to cognitive and functional safety

markers (routine stability, nighttime activity, medication adherence proxies)¹⁰ that allow for care plan adjustments and resource allocation responsive to real-world decline patterns (consistent with the broader role of DBMs in continuous monitoring).

Clinical research

In clinical research, DBMs are increasingly operated as digital end points that complement or, in some settings, potentially substitute clinical scales by providing higher-frequency, ecologically valid measures of function. A concrete example is the use of smartphone-based active tests, such as finger tapping speed and rhythm, and passive mobility measures (such as step-to-step variability) collected repeatedly during longitudinal studies to quantify motor fluctuations and track symptom trajectories between visits¹³⁰. In a phase III PD clinical trial sub-study (NCT02642393), these mobility measures correlated with MDS-UPDRS scores and reduced participant burden outcomes relative to solely in-clinic assessments, thereby enabling more efficient trial designs and remote follow-up¹³⁰. In parallel, vision-based biomarkers^{43–45} extracted from standardized videos (such as recorded MDS-UPDRS assessments) can provide objective kinematic features that reduce rater variability and scale clinician time, while preserving clinically interpretable links to established motor outcomes. Together, these DBM-enabled end points support decentralized data collection, richer characterization of treatment response and, when validated, can reduce required sample sizes for prevention and progression trials by increasing measurement precision^{131,132}, as shown in conditions like dementia (NCT05385913).

Outlook

DBMs are transforming how diseases are monitored, diagnosed and treated, with a strong focus on detecting the earliest pathological changes in pre-symptomatic and prodromal disease stages. Wearable sensors, smartphones and ambient monitoring systems have enabled continuous assessment of motor, cognitive and behavioural symptoms outside clinical settings to identify subtle, functional health alterations that might precede clinical manifestations. This fundamental change provides a deeper understanding of disease trajectories and treatment responses, which are particularly relevant for neurodegenerative disorders characterized by heterogeneous symptom presentations and fluctuations that traditional, episodic assessments often fail to capture.

Current evidence reveals clear patterns in DBM effectiveness across different health aspects and NDDs. Motor-related symptom quantification consistently demonstrates the highest success rates across multiple NDDs. Within motor symptoms, gait analysis has emerged as the most universally effective technology, showing robust performance across multiple NDDs^{133–135}. Disease-specific motor-related DBMs are also promising; motor subtyping⁴⁵, hand tremor and bradykinesia quantification⁹⁷, and keystroke dynamics⁵¹ can be used to identify individuals with PD from healthy controls, whereas speech analysis can classify both individuals with Alzheimer disease and PD (although speech arguably reflects more than purely motor dysfunction)³⁸.

The dominance of motor-related DBMs probably stems from multiple factors; these symptoms are easier to measure using widely available IMUs and often correlate directly with disease processes and progression. By contrast, more abstract concepts, such as cognition, are more challenging to measure, particularly when assessed passively. Among NDDs, PD demonstrates the most mature DBM ecosystem owing to its prominent motor manifestations. However, conditions like MCI or Alzheimer disease present different challenges as treatment

options remain limited even after diagnosis, restricting the real-world utility of monitoring outside clinical trial contexts.

This Review highlights several key advances: taxonomic organization of DBMs according to sensing modalities (wearable, portable, inner body and ambient) clarifies the technical landscape; categorization by health aspect (cognitive, motor, behavioural, physiological, environmental and molecular) helps match technologies to specific symptom domains; classification by utility (diagnosis, monitoring and treatment optimization) establishes a clear intended use for DBMs. Despite these advances, knowledge gaps and challenges remain.

Existing sensing technologies come with limitations as to what can be measured; even in the best-case scenario, they are limited by available sensing technologies (Box 3). For example, new molecular wearable sensing, which leverages sweat, interstitial fluid and breath analysis, could enable the monitoring of various 'traditional' biomarkers in digital settings, including inflammation, glucose levels or stress hormones¹³⁶. In the future, it might be possible to directly monitor blood-based biomarkers like plasma amyloid- β _{42:40} ratio and phosphorylated tau181 and phosphorylated tau217 in the context of Alzheimer disease¹⁹. Innovations such as the 'electronic nose', which mimics olfactory sensing to detect volatile organic compounds in breath or sebum, could be used for early disease detection in neurological disorders such as Alzheimer disease and PD¹³⁷. Additionally, miniaturized implantable sensors¹³⁸, optical biosensing with flexible technologies¹³⁹ and bioimpedance monitoring¹⁴⁰ support the tracking of cardiovascular, neurological and metabolic health in real-time. Integrating artificial intelligence-driven analysis with these sensing modalities can further empower new sensing capabilities.

Future research should develop robust frameworks for integrating data across multiple sensing modalities. Currently, most studies leverage single sensors focusing on isolated symptoms but NDDs manifest across multiple domains (for example, cognitive decline, motor dysfunction, sleep disturbances and emotional dysregulation). Integrating independent sensors comes with various challenges (Table 2) such as sensors running out of sync, variability in sensor quality across devices, battery life limitations and computing power restrictions⁴ (Supplementary Table S1). Although these issues can be corrected mathematically to some degree¹⁴¹, manufacturers are often not incentivized to provide synchronization capabilities for interoperability because proprietary signal-processing algorithms are usually protected as core intellectual property and resources are typically directed towards consumer-facing features like user experience and battery life. Computational methods that combine data from wearables, smartphones and ambient sensors could provide a more holistic disease profile; for example, composite DBMs that integrate motor assessments (such as gait parameters from wearable accelerometers) with cognitive measures (such as attention metrics from smartphone interactions) and physiological parameters (such as heart rate variability from smartwatches and sleep patterns from bed sensors)^{142,143}.

Despite artificial intelligence algorithms having shown promise in analysing DBMs, most current approaches apply uniform models across patients. The heterogeneity of NDDs would benefit from personalized models that account for individual baseline characteristics and disease subtypes while remaining interpretable. Interpretable algorithms that adapt to personal baselines and detect subtle deviations could help indicate each individual's disease progression or treatment response.

Moreover, **foundation models** (models pre-trained on billions or trillions of samples) on vast multimodal datasets including omics data,

Box 3 | Technology transfer considerations

Every digital biomarker study confronts a fundamental trade-off between measurement quality and practical feasibility. Research-validated devices, such as the ActiGraph, offer superior reliability but come at a higher cost and limited scalability, whereas bring-your-own-device approaches using participants' smartphones and smartwatches reduce cost and support larger recruitment but introduce complex validation requirements arising from hardware and software heterogeneity. A parallel tension exists between obtrusiveness and adherence: high-precision, high-burden methods, such as 12-lead electrocardiogram or polysomnography, require clinic or laboratory visits, moderate-burden options like single-lead electrocardiogram patches and wearable sleep trackers balance precision with home use, and low-burden solutions, such as wrist-based photoplethysmography or contactless smart mattress sensors, maximize long-term adherence at the expense of some measurement fidelity. Matching technology to study design is therefore critical. Long-term studies spanning months to years should prioritize ambient sensing and passive solutions to minimize participant fatigue, whereas short pivotal trials can tolerate more obtrusive approaches. Population characteristics also matter. Cognitive impairment might preclude technologies requiring active engagement, making passive and ambient systems essential for later-stage neurodegenerative disease research. Emerging ambient sensors, such as the Emerald device, combined with artificial intelligence and edge computing, are narrowing the performance gap with wearables while maintaining minimal user burden.

Care-assisting technologies for patients with neurodegenerative diseases are expanding rapidly, fuelled by an ageing population on the demand side and the convergence of artificial intelligence with ubiquitous smartphones and wearables on the supply side. One model to support innovation involves strategic partnerships between technology firms, pharmaceutical companies and research institutions, exemplified by Biogen and Apple's 'Intuition' brain health study using the Apple Watch for cognitive monitoring (NCT05058950)¹⁴⁹. However, reliance on large technology platforms introduces 'platform risk', whereby platform holders maintain control over core algorithms, sensors, and data infrastructure and their business priorities might migrate away from regulated healthcare applications. For example, when [Apple modified its HealthKit data access policies](#) in 2019, several digital health companies experienced

operational disruptions, a cautionary example for neurodegenerative disease applications where long-term longitudinal data collection is essential.

Innovative startups such as [Rune Labs](#), [Altoida](#) and [Indivi](#) are attempting to mitigate platform risk by pursuing business-to-business models in which they provide pharmaceutical companies with validated digital end points and remote monitoring services for clinical trials. This strategy generates near-term revenue while building clinical evidence for future regulatory approvals. However, it creates its own constraints: pharmaceutical companies typically seek digital biomarkers that can serve as surrogate end points to accelerate drug development timelines or improve trial efficiency, which might not align with the broader utility these technologies could provide in real-world clinical practice.

The direct-to-consumer market offers an increasingly viable alternative pathway. Companies like [MindX Sciences](#) engage consumers around holistic lifestyle improvement, whereas disease-specific platforms such as [Rune Labs' StrivePD](#) and the Michael J. Fox Foundation's [Fox Insight](#) demonstrate how patient-driven data collection creates value both for individuals managing their conditions and for researchers requiring real-world evidence. This expansion from preventive into secondary care signals maturation in healthcare technology adoption that could accelerate digital biomarker uptake through consumer demand rather than insurance-based payment models.

A broader challenge is that regulatory and reimbursement systems were not designed for technology-based service delivery. Moreover, technology development is inherently iterative: tools available today will improve with wider adoption and continued development, yet assessing performance too strictly at an early stage risks foreclosing the opportunity for a better tool tomorrow. Supporting this iterative trajectory would represent a paradigm shift in how the commercialization of new technologies is approached. Until reimbursement frameworks evolve to accommodate these realities, digital biomarker systems must simultaneously pursue multiple commercialization channels (business-to-business partnerships, direct-to-consumer offerings and clinical integration pilots) to sustain development and build the evidence base necessary for long-term adoption.

medical imaging, continuous wearable sensor streams and electronic health records) could enable large-scale modelling of complex biological and physiological data and help uncover hidden patterns and new biomarkers. Although interpretability remains an important issue and subject of active research, the sheer performance of foundation models could still bring benefits for lower-stakes use cases like population-level screening and enriching clinical trial cohorts. Foundation models support self-supervised learning (learning without supervision/ground truth), which could be further explored in the context of biomedical time series data and DBMs, where large quantities of unlabelled data are the norm. Furthermore, with advancements in cross-modal and transfer learning, foundation models could support adaptation to diverse populations and conditions, making DBM discovery more robust, scalable and clinically meaningful. Nonetheless, foundation

models such as large language models suffer from hallucination, which requires caution and extensive domain expertise to be exercised in the context of biomedical research.

Another critical limitation is the predominance of cross-sectional studies with small sample sizes. Large-scale, longitudinal studies are essential to establishing the prognostic value of DBMs. The field would benefit from multicentre initiatives that track participants from pre-symptomatic stages through disease progression over 5–10 years, like the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative¹⁴⁴, the Parkinson's Progression Markers Initiative¹⁴⁵, and the African American Dementia and Aging Project¹⁴⁶, but focus on digital assessments. These studies should include diverse populations across age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and technology literacy to ensure generalizability. Apart from major initiatives, such as [Mobilise-D](#) and [RADAR-CNS](#), typical

Alzheimer disease studies include fewer than 100 participants and lack external validation^{147,148}. A focus on ubiquitous and easily scalable mobile and wearable consumer devices could help facilitate this transition, as demonstrated by a collaboration between Biogen and Apple¹⁴⁹. Open-source digital health frameworks for consumer operating systems (like iOS and Android) could further foster the implementation and standardization of larger longitudinal studies^{150,151}.

The cost-effectiveness of implementing DBMs remains largely unexamined, which hinders DBM adoption. For example, high family-related out-of-pocket costs are associated with dementia care and probably increase with dementia severity, therefore supporting the need for home-based or telehealth interventions¹⁵². Moreover, initial evidence indicates that DBMs could drive down sample sizes for clinical trials in NDDs, which would translate to substantial cost savings in clinical trials^{132,153,154}. Health economics research should quantify the potential value of these technologies more broadly in terms of earlier diagnosis, optimized treatment, reduced hospitalization and improved quality of life. These analyses should consider various stakeholder perspectives, including healthcare systems, insurers and patients, to better inform reimbursement policies and implementation strategies.

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Author contributions

F.N., N.S. and E.A. contributed substantially to the discussion, writing, and editing of this manuscript and managed the submission process. F.N. developed figures and tables for the manuscript, revised by N.S., F.V.L. and E.A. Q.Z., C.G., A.M., K.S., F.V.L. and E.A. all contributed important ideas for the manuscript text, tables and figures. All authors reviewed the manuscript and provided critical feedback that formed the ideas for the proposed framework.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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