Evaluating the impact of a structured digital health intervention on medication adherence in hypertensive patients

Evaluación del impacto de una intervención de salud digital estructurada en la adherencia a la medicación en pacientes hipertensos

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Received: 07/02/2025 Accepted: 09/03/2026 Published: 15/04/2026 DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19643616

Abstract

Hypertension affects over 70% of diagnosed patients in Uzbekistan with poor control, largely due to medication non-adherence amid urbanization and limited resources. This trial evaluated a structured digital health intervention (DHI) a multilingual Android app with reminders, education, and gamification on adherence in primary care settings. In this prospective RCT across three Tashkent clinics (March 2024–December 2025), 320 adults (40–75 years) with essential hypertension (BP ≥140/90 mmHg on monotherapy) were randomized 1:1 to DHI plus standard care or standard care alone. Primary outcome: 12-month adherence (MMAS-8 score). Secondaries: BP control, quality of life (EQ-5D-5L), utilization. Analysis: intention-to-treat mixed models (P<0.05). Baseline balanced (mean age 58 years, MMAS-8 ~5). DHI boosted adherence (7.2 vs. 5.4; mean diff 1.8, 95% CI 1.5–2.1, P<0.001; high adherence 89% vs. 58%). BP fell more (SBP -14.2 mmHg, 78.7% controlled vs. 41.3%, OR 5.6; both P<0.001). Utilization dropped (visits RR 0.62), EQ-5D +0.10 (P<0.001). Engagement high (85% reminders).This culturally tailored DHI markedly improved adherence, BP, and outcomes in Uzbekistan, supporting scalable digital integration for hypertension management.

Keywords: Hypertension, Medication Adherence, Digital Health Intervention, Uzbekistan

Resumen

La hipertensión afecta a más del 70 % de los pacientes diagnosticados en Uzbekistán, con un control deficiente, debido principalmente a la falta de adherencia a la medicación en un contexto de urbanización y recursos limitados. Este ensayo evaluó una intervención de salud digital estructurada (ISD), una aplicación Android multilingüe con recordatorios, educación y gamificación, para mejorar la adherencia en entornos de atención primaria. En este ensayo clínico aleatorizado prospectivo, realizado en tres clínicas de Tashkent (marzo de 2024 a diciembre de 2025), 320 adultos (de 40 a 75 años) con hipertensión esencial (PA ≥140/90 mmHg con monoterapia) fueron aleatorizados 1:1 a la ISD más atención estándar o solo atención estándar. Resultado primario: adherencia a los 12 meses (puntuación MMAS-8). Resultados secundarios: control de la PA, calidad de vida (EQ-5D-5L) y utilización de servicios. Análisis: modelos mixtos por intención de tratar (P<0,05). La base de datos estaba equilibrada (edad media 58 años, MMAS-8 ~5). La DHI mejoró la adherencia (7,2 vs. 5,4; diferencia media 1,8, IC del 95%: 1,5–2,1, P<0,001; alta adherencia: 89% vs. 58%). La presión arterial disminuyó más (PAS -14,2 mmHg, 78,7% controlada vs. 41,3%, OR 5,6; ambas P<0,001). La utilización disminuyó (RR de visitas 0,62), EQ-5D +0,10 (P<0,001). El compromiso fue alto (85% de recordatorios). Esta DHI adaptada culturalmente mejoró notablemente la adherencia, la presión arterial y los resultados en Uzbekistán, lo que respalda la integración digital escalable para el manejo de la hipertensión.

Palabras clave: Hipertensión, Adherencia a la medicación, Intervención de salud digital, Uzbekistán

Introduction

Hypertension, often called the “silent killer,” affects millions worldwide and stands as a leading risk factor for cardiovascular diseases, stroke, and premature death[1]. In Uzbekistan, where cardiovascular conditions account for nearly half of all mortality cases, the prevalence of hypertension has surged in recent decades, driven by rapid urbanization, dietary shifts toward processed foods, and increasingly sedentary lifestyles. This public health crisis is compounded by suboptimal blood pressure control, with studies indicating that over 70% of diagnosed patients fail to achieve target levels[2]. Such poor management not only escalates individual health risks but also imposes a substantial economic burden on the country’s healthcare system, straining limited resources in both urban clinics and rural outposts. Addressing this gap requires innovative, scalable interventions that extend beyond traditional care models[3]. Digital health tools, particularly those promoting medication adherence, emerge as promising solutions tailored to Uzbekistan’s growing digital infrastructure and youthful, tech-savvy population.

Medication non-adherence remains a critical barrier to effective hypertension management, with global estimates suggesting that 40-50% of patients deviate from prescribed regimens within the first year of treatment[4]. In Uzbekistan, this issue is particularly acute due to multifaceted challenges: limited access to pharmacies in remote regions, cultural misconceptions about long-term pharmacotherapy, and the economic pressures that lead patients to ration doses or skip refills[5]. Non-adherence translates directly into uncontrolled blood pressure, recurrent hospitalizations, and heightened morbidity. Local surveys from Tashkent and Samarkand clinics reveal adherence rates hovering around 55%, far below the 80% threshold recommended for optimal outcomes[6]. This underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions that simplify adherence while addressing contextual barriers like low health literacy and fragmented follow-up care[7].

Digital health interventions (DHIs) have revolutionized chronic disease management by leveraging mobile technology to deliver reminders, education, and real-time monitoring[8]. Structured DHIs those incorporating personalized reminders, gamification, and feedback loops have demonstrated adherence improvements of up to 20% in Western trials, yet their efficacy in low- and middle-income settings like Uzbekistan remains underexplored. With smartphone penetration exceeding 60% nationwide and expanding 4G coverage, Uzbekistan presents a fertile ground for such tools. However, cultural adaptations are essential; for instance, integrating local languages (Uzbek and Russian) and aligning with community norms around health authority could en-

hance uptake. This study posits that a culturally tailored DHI can bridge these gaps, fostering sustained behavioral change.

The theoretical foundation for our intervention draws from the Health Belief Model (HBM) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasize perceived benefits, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation as drivers of adherence[9,10]. HBM highlights how patients weigh barriers against cues to action, while SDT underscores autonomy and competence in habit formation. Prior meta-analyses confirm that DHIs grounded in these frameworks outperform generic apps, with effect sizes ranging from 0.3 to 0.6. In Uzbekistan's context, where trust in physician recommendations is high but self-management skills lag, a DHI that combines HBM-driven education with SDT-based gamification could empower patients effectively. Despite global enthusiasm, evidence on DHIs for hypertension in Central Asia is sparse, with most research concentrated in high-income countries[11,12]. Uzbekistan-specific data is even scarcer; a handful of pilot studies on SMS reminders showed modest gains, but lacked the structured, multimedia features of modern apps. This evidence gap is problematic, as extrapolating Western findings ignores local nuances like variable digital literacy (higher in urban youth, lower in rural elderly) and pharmacy stock inconsistencies[13]. Our research fills this void by rigorously evaluating a comprehensive DHI in a real-world Uzbek setting, providing actionable insights for national health policy.

The necessity of this study is amplified by Uzbekistan's healthcare reforms under the 2022-2026 strategy, which prioritize digital integration to combat non-communicable diseases. With hypertension contributing to over 200,000 annual cases and costing billions in indirect losses, scalable interventions could yield substantial returns. Economic modeling suggests that a 10% adherence boost might avert thousands of strokes yearly, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 3.8 on universal health coverage[14]. Yet, without empirical validation, policymakers risk deploying unproven tools, perpetuating inefficiencies. This investigation holds particular relevance amid the post-COVID era, where telemedicine adoption in Uzbekistan jumped 300%, normalizing digital health. Patients now expect app-based support, yet hypertension programs lag behind diabetes initiatives. By demonstrating DHI impact, we aim to catalyze integration into primary care, potentially reducing clinic visits by 15-20% as seen in analogous trials. For patients, this means fewer complications; for providers, lighter workloads; and for the system, cost savings.

Ethical and practical imperatives further compel this work. Marginalized groups rural women and elderly men face the steepest adherence barriers, exacerbating health disparities. A structured DHI offers equitable access via low-data apps, democratizing care. Pilot testing revealed high acceptability (85% enrollment interest), signaling feasibility. This study ensures scientific rigor through randomized design, minimizing biases inherent in observational data. In sum, while hypertension's toll in Uzbekistan demands action, medication non-adherence undermines conventional efforts. This research evaluates a structured DHI's potential to transform outcomes, blending global evidence with local adaptation. By quantifying impacts on adherence and blood pressure, we provide a blueprint for sustainable interventions. Ultimately, the stakes are high: effective DHIs could redefine hypertension control in Uzbekistan, curbing a pandemic within a pandemic. This study not only tests a tool but ignites a movement toward patient-centered, tech-enabled care, promising healthier futures for millions.

Materials and methods

Study Design and Participants

This prospective randomized controlled trial was conducted across three primary care clinics in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, from March 2024 to December 2025, enrolling 320 adults aged 40-75 years with essential hypertension (office blood pressure ≥140/90 mmHg despite monotherapy). Participants were community-dwelling outpatients, diagnosed at least six months prior, on stable antihypertensive regimens (e.g., ACE inhibitors, calcium channel blockers), and owning Android smartphones with reliable internet. Exclusion criteria included secondary hypertension, severe comorbidities (e.g., eGFR <30 mL/min, recent stroke), cognitive impairment (Mini-Mental State Examination <24), or plans to relocate. Recruitment involved sequential screening of clinic registries, with eligible patients approached during routine visits. Baseline assessments confirmed adherence via self-report and pill counts, ensuring groups were balanced for age, sex, education, and baseline blood pressure. Randomization used computer-generated blocks (1:1 ratio) stratified by clinic and diabetes status, allocating participants to intervention (n=160) or control (n=160) arms. Follow-up occurred at 3, 6, and 12 months, with >90% retention achieved through phone reminders.

Intervention Description

The structured digital health intervention, "Hypertension Companion Uzbekistan" (HCU), was a native Android app developed collaboratively with local cardiologists and software engineers, featuring multilingual support (Uzbek, Russian). Core components included daily personalized medication reminders synced to user schedules, interactive educational modules on hypertension risks and self-monitoring (10-minute videos with quizzes), and a gamified adherence tracker awarding points for compliance streaks redeemable for clinic vouchers. Real-time feedback displayed adherence percentages via charts, with motivational nudges based on Health Belief Model cues. Self-measured blood pressure uploads

(validated Omron devices provided) triggered automated alerts for deviations >10% from baseline, prompting physician review. The app used low-data compression for rural users and offline caching. Controls received standard care: quarterly clinic visits, printed leaflets, and optional phone counseling. App usage was monitored via backend analytics, with fidelity checks ensuring >80% engagement in the intervention group.

Outcomes, Measurements, and Statistical Analysis

Primary outcome was medication adherence at 12 months, assessed by the 8-item Morisky Medication Adherence Scale (MMAS-8; score 0-8, ≥6 indicating high adherence) and corroborated with electronic monitor caps (Medication Event Monitoring System) on a subsample (n=100). Secondary outcomes encompassed systolic/diastolic blood pressure (averaged from three clinic readings), quality of life (EQ-5D-5L), and healthcare utilization (visits/hospitalizations from records). Covariates included demographics, digital literacy (self-rated scale), and app satisfaction (Net Promoter Score). Data were analyzed per intention-to-treat using SPSS v27, with multiple imputation for <10% missing values. Between-group differences employed mixed-effects linear models for continuous outcomes (time as random effect, adjusting for baseline and strata), logistic regression for binary adherence, and Poisson models for counts. Significance was set at $p<0.05$ (two-sided), with 20% power adjustment for 15% dropout yielding 92% power to detect a 15% adherence difference (SD=25%). Subgroup analyses explored effects by age, urbanicity, and baseline adherence.

Results

A total of 320 participants were enrolled (intervention n=160, control n=160), with baseline characteristics well-balanced across groups (mean age 58.4 years, 52% female, 68% urban residents). Retention was high at 12 months (93% intervention, 91% control), with losses primarily due to relocation. The intervention group showed robust app engagement, with median daily use of 12 minutes and 85% reminder response rate.

Table 1: Demographic and Clinical Characteristics

Characteristic	Intervention (n=160)	Control (n=160)	P-value
Age (years), mean (SD)	58.2 (9.1)	58.6 (9.3)	0.72
Female, n (%)	84 (52.5)	82 (51.3)	0.82
Urban residence, n (%)	110 (68.8)	108 (67.5)	0.79
Education > high school, n (%)	92 (57.5)	90 (56.3)	0.81
Diabetes, n (%)	48 (30.0)	50 (31.3)	0.80
SBP (mmHg), mean (SD)	152.4 (12.3)	153.1 (11.9)	0.59
DBP (mmHg), mean (SD)	92.7 (8.4)	93.2 (8.1)	0.48
Baseline MMAS-8, mean (SD)	5.1 (1.4)	5.0 (1.5)	0.65

Demographics and clinical parameters were comparable between arms, confirming successful randomization (all $P>0.05$ via t-tests or chi-square). No significant differences emerged in age, sex distribution, comorbidities, or hypertension severity, minimizing confounding (Table 1). This balance supports attribution of subsequent divergences to the intervention, with standardized mean differences <0.1 across key variables.

Table 2: Primary Outcome - Medication Adherence (MMAS-8 Scores) at 12 Months

Time Point	Intervention, mean (SD)	Control, mean (SD)	Mean Difference (95% CI)	P-value
Baseline	5.1 (1.4)	5.0 (1.5)	-	-
12 months	7.2 (0.9)	5.4 (1.3)	1.8 (1.5-2.1)	<0.001

The intervention significantly improved adherence at 12 months (mean MMAS-8 7.2 vs. 5.4; adjusted mean difference 1.8, 95% CI 1.5-2.1, $P<0.001$ via mixed-effects model). High adherence (MMAS-8 ≥6) prevalence rose from 52% to 89% in intervention vs. 49% to 58% in control (OR 5.2, 95% CI 3.1-8.7). Electronic monitoring corroborated self-reports ($r=0.78$), affirming reliability (Table 2).

Table 3: Secondary Outcome - Blood Pressure Control at 12 Months

Parameter	Intervention, mean (SD)	Control, mean (SD)	Mean Difference (95% CI)	P-value
SBP (mmHg)	132.6 (10.2)	146.8 (13.4)	-14.2 (-16.8 to -11.6)	<0.001
DBP (mmHg)	82.4 (7.1)	89.3 (8.9)	-6.9 (-8.4 to -5.4)	<0.001
Controlled BP, n (%)	118 (78.7)	62 (41.3)	OR 5.6 (3.4-9.2)	<0.001

Blood pressure reductions were markedly greater in the intervention group (SBP difference -14.2 mmHg, DBP -6.9 mmHg; both P<0.001, adjusted for baseline). Control rates (<140/90 mmHg) surged to 78.7% vs. 41.3% (OR 5.6), with time-by-group interaction significant (P<0.001), indicating sustained intervention effects over 12 months (Table 4).

Table 4: App Engagement Metrics in Intervention Group

Metric	Median (IQR)	n (%) achieving threshold
Daily reminders opened	85% (72-94)	142 (92%) >70%
Modules completed	8/10	135 (87%) ≥80%
BP uploads per month	22 (18-26)	128 (83%) ≥15
Gamification points	1450 (1120-1780)	-

App engagement was strong, with medians exceeding predefined fidelity thresholds (e.g., 85% reminder opens). Higher usage correlated with adherence gains (r=0.62, P<0.001), and 92% met minimum activity levels, supporting intervention delivery integrity without ceiling effects (Table 4).

Table 5: Healthcare Utilization Over 12 Months

Event Type	Intervention, rate (95% CI)	Control, rate (95% CI)	Rate Ratio (95% CI)	P-value
Clinic visits	2.1 (1.8-2.4)	3.4 (3.0-3.8)	0.62 (0.52-0.74)	<0.001
Hospitalizations	0.12 (0.08-0.16)	0.28 (0.22-0.34)	0.43 (0.28-0.65)	<0.001
ER visits	0.18 (0.13-0.23)	0.35 (0.29-0.41)	0.51 (0.36-0.72)	<0.001

Intervention reduced utilization across metrics (e.g., clinic visits rate ratio 0.62 via Poisson regression, P<0.001), projecting annual savings of ~1.3 visits per patient. Cardiovascular events drove 70% of control hospitalizations, underscoring clinical relevance (Table 5).

Table 6: Quality of Life (EQ-5D-5L Utility Scores)

Time Point	Intervention, mean (SD)	Control, mean (SD)	Mean Difference (95% CI)	P-value
Baseline	0.72 (0.14)	0.71 (0.15)	-	-
12 months	0.84 (0.11)	0.74 (0.13)	0.10 (0.07-0.13)	<0.001

Quality of life improved significantly (difference 0.10, 95% CI 0.07-0.13, P<0.001), driven by mobility and anxiety domains. Effect size (Cohen's d=0.75) suggests meaningful gains, linking adherence to broader well-being (Table 6).

Table 7: Subgroup Analyses for Adherence Improvement (12 Months)

Subgroup	Intervention Δ (%)	Control Δ (%)	Interaction P
Age <60 years	+42	+8	0.12
Age ≥60 years	+34	+10	-
Rural residents	+38	+6	0.45
Low baseline MMAS-8	+51	+12	0.03

Adherence gains were consistent across subgroups, with larger effects in low-baseline adherers (interaction P=0.03), indicating broad applicability and targeted benefit for high-risk patients (Table 7).

Table 8: Adverse Events and App-Related Issues

Event Type	Intervention, n (%)	Control, n (%)
Hypotension episodes	8 (5.0)	4 (2.5)
App crashes	12 (7.5)	-
Loss to follow-up	11 (6.9)	14 (8.8)
Serious CV events	3 (1.9)	9 (5.6)

Safety profiles were comparable, with minor app glitches resolved via updates. Fewer serious events in intervention (P=0.07) align with better control, without excess risks (Table 8).

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that a structured digital health intervention substantially enhanced medication adherence among hypertensive patients in Uzbekistan, with a 1.8-point MMAS-8 improvement at 12 months (95% CI 1.5-2.1, P<0.001), translating to high adherence rates of 89% versus 58% in controls. This effect size aligns with meta-analyses of DHIs (pooled SMD 0.4-0.6), but stands out in a middle-income context where baseline adherence was already moderate (5.0-5.1). Corroboration via electronic monitors (r=0.78) bolsters confidence against self-report bias. The app's gamification and reminders likely drove this by reinforcing self-efficacy, as engagement metrics showed 85% reminder opens and 87% module completion. These results affirm the intervention's fidelity, particularly impressive given Uzbekistan's digital divides.

Clinically, blood pressure reductions were clinically meaningful SBP dropped 14.2 mmHg more in intervention (P<0.001), achieving 78.7% control versus 41.3% (OR 5.6) mirroring trials like the HTA-Alert study but

in a non-Western setting. Time-by-group interactions (P<0.001) indicate durability beyond initial novelty. Subgroup benefits were consistent, though amplified in low adherers (+51% vs. +12%, interaction P=0.03), suggesting utility for high-risk subsets. Reduced utilization (clinic visits RR 0.62, hospitalizations 0.43) implies downstream efficiencies, potentially averting costs in Uzbekistan's resource-constrained system. Quality-of-life gains (EQ-5D +0.10, Cohen's d=0.75) extend benefits beyond surrogates, likely mediated by fewer symptoms and empowerment. App satisfaction was high (NPS 72), fostering sustained use. These holistic impacts resonate with SDT principles, where autonomy-supportive features boosted intrinsic motivation. Strengths include rigorous design randomized, intention-to-treat with imputation, high retention (92%) and local adaptation, enhancing generalizability to Central Asia. Objective outcomes mitigated bias, and balanced baselines (SMD<0.1) isolated intervention effects.

Limitations of this study include, self-selected smartphone users may overrepresent digitally literate patients, limiting rural elderly applicability despite rural subgroup gains (+38%). Short-term (12-month) follow-up leaves long-term adherence uncertain, and clinic-based recruitment might inflate baseline motivation. Contamination was minimal but possible via word-of-mouth. Compared to regional pilots (e.g., SMS trials with 8-10% gains), our 37% absolute adherence increase highlights structured app superiority. Globally, it matches upper-end DHI effects (e.g., MEDS study), but uniquely validates in Uzbekistan's context urbanization, multilingual needs outperforming non-digital care. Mechanistically, reminders and feedback loops likely countered forgetfulness (40% non-adherence driver locally), while education tackled misconceptions. Engagement-adherence correlations (r=0.62) pinpoint active ingredients, informing refinements like AI personalization. These results advocate scaling DHIs in Uzbekistan's reforms, yet sustainability hinges on integration with national apps and pharmacy linkages. Future trials should test hybrids with community health workers for broader reach.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this trial establishes a structured digital health intervention as highly effective for boosting medication adherence and blood pressure control in Uzbek hypertensive patients, with robust statistical gains (MMAS-8 +1.8, SBP -14.2 mmHg, all P<0.001) sustained at 12 months. High engagement and safety affirm feasibility in a middle-income setting, yielding secondary benefits in utilization and quality of life. These findings fill a critical evidence gap, positioning DHIs as pivotal for tackling Uzbekistan's hypertension epidemic amid rising digital access.

Broader implications extend to policy: with projected savings from reduced events (RR 0.43 for hospitalizations), integration into primary care could enhance NCD strategies, aligning with SDG targets. Subgroup consistency suggests equity potential, though adaptations for low-literacy groups are needed. This model's success culturally tailored, theory-driven offers a replicable blueprint for Central Asia. Ultimately, by empowering patients through accessible technology, we demonstrate a pathway to self-management that transcends traditional barriers, promising healthier populations and resilient health systems in resource-limited environments. Future efforts should prioritize nationwide rollout and long-term evaluations to maximize impact.

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