Choosing a medical alarm for an older relative: what matters most

Why a medical alarm needs careful thought

When an older adult lives alone or spends time at home without someone nearby, a medical alarm can provide reassurance for them and for the family. But not all devices are the same. Some rely on a landline. Some need a monthly subscription. Others have limited range or short battery life. Knowing what to check before you choose can save frustration later and make sure the device actually helps when it is needed.

Automatic fall detection

The biggest risk for many older adults is falling and being unable to get up. A device that only works when the person presses a button is useless if they are unconscious or cannot reach the button. Look for a medical alarm that includes automatic fall detection. This feature uses sensors in the device to recognise a fall and send an alert without the wearer having to do anything. Not all fall detection works equally well, so it is worth asking how the system distinguishes a fall from everyday movements like bending down or sitting quickly.

Wearing options that suit their habits

A medical alarm is only helpful if it is worn. Many older adults will not wear something that feels uncomfortable, looks medical, or gets in the way during daily tasks. The best options let the person choose how to wear the device. Common choices include a wristband, a lanyard around the neck, a belt clip, or even a keyring that stays on their person. If the person already wears a watch, a wristband style might feel natural. If they dislike anything on their wrist, a lanyard or belt clip could work better. The point is to find a style they will actually keep on their body throughout the day and night.

GPS coverage and location tracking

If the older adult is active and goes out for walks, shopping, or visits to friends, a device with GPS coverage becomes important. A medical alarm that can pinpoint their location allows help to reach them even if they cannot explain where they are. Check whether the device uses mobile networks for GPS and whether it works in the areas they visit most. Some devices only work inside the home or within a limited range of a base unit, which is fine for someone who rarely goes out but not for someone who spends time in the garden, at the shops, or on public transport.



Two-way voice communication

When an alert is sent, the person wearing the device needs to be able to talk to the response team or a family member. Two-way voice communication lets them speak directly through the device without needing to reach a phone. This is particularly helpful after a fall when the person may be on the floor and unable to get to a landline. The voice quality matters, so look for a device with a clear speaker and microphone that can pick up a voice even if the person is not holding the device close to their mouth.

Battery life and charging routine

A medical alarm that runs out of battery is no better than no alarm at all. Check the battery life of any device you consider. Some need charging every day, while others last several days or even weeks on a single charge. Think about the person's daily habits. Will they remember to put the device on charge every night? If not, a device with a longer battery life or one that uses replaceable batteries might be more practical. Some devices also give a low-battery warning that is loud enough to be heard across the house, which helps prevent the device from going dead unnoticed.

Sensitivity settings and false alerts

Fall detection is useful, but it can also trigger false alerts if the sensitivity settings are not adjusted properly. A device that sends an alert every time the person bends over to pick something up will become annoying and may lead to them ignoring or disabling the alarm. Look for a device that allows you to adjust the sensitivity or that has been tested to reduce false alerts. Good sensitivity settings balance the need to catch real falls while ignoring normal movements. If the device comes with a default setting, ask whether it can be changed to suit the person's activity level.

Monthly fees and long-term cost

Many medical alarms charge a monthly fee for the monitoring service. These fees can add up over time and become a significant expense, especially on a fixed income. Some devices, however, offer no monthly fees, which can make them more affordable in the long run. When comparing options, look beyond the upfront cost of the device and consider the total cost over a year or two. Also check whether the fee includes everything, or whether there are extra charges for features like GPS tracking, additional responders, or replacement devices. A wearable safety device that has no ongoing fees can be a more sustainable choice for someone on a budget.



Ease of setup and everyday use

A medical alarm should be simple to set up and use. If the instructions are complicated or the device requires frequent pairing or recharging, the older adult may struggle to use it independently. Look for a device that comes ready to use out of the box, with minimal configuration. The buttons should be large and clearly labelled. The charging dock should be

easy to reach and use. If the device uses a mobile app for family members to monitor alerts, the app should be straightforward to install and navigate. The less friction in the daily routine, the more likely the device will be used consistently.

Water resistance for bathroom safety

Many falls happen in the bathroom, where floors are slippery and surfaces are hard. A medical alarm that cannot get wet is not safe to wear in the shower or bath. Look for a device with a good water resistance rating. Ideally, it should be waterproof enough to wear while showering or bathing. If the device must be removed before going near water, the person may forget to put it back on afterwards, leaving them unprotected at a time when falls are common.

Range and connectivity

Some medical alarms work only within a short distance of a base unit that plugs into a landline or a home Wi-Fi network. Others use mobile networks and work anywhere there is cellular coverage. Think about where the older adult spends their time. If they have a large garden, a garage workshop, or a holiday home, a device with a longer range or mobile connectivity may be necessary. A wearable safety device that works on mobile networks gives the person freedom to move around their property and beyond without losing protection.

Response time and who gets the alert

When an alert is triggered, someone needs to respond quickly. Some devices connect to a professional monitoring centre that contacts the wearer and sends help if needed. Others simply call a list of pre-set family members or neighbours. Both approaches can work, but the response time and reliability of the monitoring service matter. If the device relies on family members, make sure they are usually available and can reach the person quickly. If it uses a professional centre, check the average response time and what happens if the first responder does not answer.



Putting it all together

Choosing a medical alarm for an older adult is about matching the device to the person's lifestyle, habits, and environment. No single device is perfect for everyone. Start by thinking about where they spend their time, how active they are, what they are comfortable wearing, and who can respond if an alert is sent. Then compare devices on the features that matter most for their situation. A good medical alarm can give both the wearer and their family genuine peace of mind, but only if it is chosen carefully and used consistently.