What to check before buying a personal alarm for an older relative

Choosing an alarm for an older adult is less about buying a gadget and more about matching the device to the way they live. A good fit makes it easy to call for help, gives family members a clear way to respond, and avoids features that feel confusing or uncomfortable. Before making a decision, look past the product name and check how the alarm works in everyday situations.

Start with the person, not the device

Begin with a practical picture of the older adult's routine. Do they spend most time indoors, or do they walk to the shops, visit friends, or spend time in the garden? Do they use a phone confidently, or do they prefer a simple button they can press without thinking? An alarm that suits an active person who leaves home often may not suit someone who mainly needs help in the bathroom or at night.

Comfort matters too. Some people dislike wearing anything around their neck, while others find a wrist-worn alarm easier to remember. If the device is itchy, heavy, awkward to charge, or hard to explain, it may end up in a drawer. The best option is usually the one the person will actually keep nearby and know how to use.

Points worth checking before you buy

- **How the alert is triggered.** A clearly marked SOS button is useful when the person is conscious and can press it. Fall detection may add reassurance when someone cannot press a button after a fall, though it is worth understanding that no detection system is perfect.
- **Who receives the alert.** Check whether alerts go to named emergency contacts, a monitoring service, or both. For many families, knowing exactly who will be notified is as important as the alert itself.
- **Whether two-way voice is available.** Two-way calling can help a trusted contact understand what happened, offer reassurance, and decide what kind of help is needed. This can be more useful than a silent alert.
- **Location features.** GPS location can help when an older adult leaves home and needs assistance away from a familiar address. It is less central for someone who rarely goes out, but still useful if they wander or get disoriented.
- **Ongoing costs and commitments.** Some alarms come with monthly monitoring fees, while others connect directly to family or trusted contacts without that fee. Compare

the full cost over time, not just the initial device.

When comparing medical alarms for elderly New Zealanders, pay attention to what happens after the button is pressed. A fast alert means little if nobody is available to answer, if the contact list is out of date, or if the person using the alarm does not know what to say. Ask how the alert is sent, who can respond, and whether there is a way to confirm the person is safe.



Check daily practicalities

A personal alarm has to fit around ordinary life. Battery life is a key point. A device that needs frequent charging can become a nuisance, especially for someone with memory changes or

limited dexterity. Look for a clear charging routine, visible battery indicators, and a simple way to know when the device needs attention.

Water resistance is another detail people often overlook. An alarm may be worn while washing hands, caught in rain, or left near a sink. Checking the stated water resistance helps set realistic expectations. It does not mean the device should be treated as waterproof in every situation, so follow the care instructions that come with it.

Signal coverage also deserves thought. An alarm that relies on mobile connectivity needs to work where the older adult spends time. Coverage can vary between towns, rural properties, apartment blocks, and inside buildings. If the person lives in an area with patchy reception, ask how the alarm behaves when a signal is weak and whether alerts can still be sent through another route.

Make the setup manageable

The setup process can reveal a lot about how family friendly a device will be. Check whether contacts can be added or changed without specialist help, and whether the system allows more than one trusted contact. Families often need flexibility, especially when adult children live in different places or when a neighbour is better placed to respond during the day.

It is also worth agreeing on a response plan before anything happens. Decide who receives the first alert, who has a spare key, when to call emergency services, and what to do if the older adult cannot speak clearly. A short written plan can reduce confusion and help everyone act calmly.

Testing is part of responsible setup. Use the test function if the device has one, and make sure the person understands the difference between a test and a real alert. Repeat the basics now and then, especially if the alarm has been unused for a while. Confidence grows when the routine feels familiar.



Think about privacy and independence

Some older adults welcome location tracking because it helps family members check in without constant phone calls. Others may feel watched or embarrassed by the idea. The right approach depends on the person's wishes, their safety needs, and the level of trust within the family. Discussing the device openly is usually better than presenting it as a surprise.

Independence is worth protecting. An alarm should support the person's choices, not replace ordinary contact or good judgement. It can help someone stay at home with more confidence, but it is not a substitute for regular check-ins, suitable housing, medication support, or medical care when needed.

Another point is how the alarm handles false alerts. Accidental presses happen, particularly with buttons worn on the wrist or chest. A system that allows two-way voice can reduce unnecessary worry because the contact can speak to the person and assess the situation. Clear instructions about cancelling a false alert can also prevent confusion.

Compare features without overbuying

It can be tempting to choose the device with the longest feature list. That is not always the best decision. Extra functions may be useful for one person and irritating for another. A simple alarm with reliable alerts, clear voice contact, and contacts who respond promptly may be more valuable than a complex device that is difficult to wear or maintain.

For medical alarms for elderly New Zealanders, the decision often comes down to a few practical questions. Will the person wear it? Can they trigger it? Will the right people be told? Can they speak to someone? Does it work in the places they go? If the answer to those questions is clear, the rest of the feature list becomes easier to judge.



Ask before committing

Before paying for any alarm, ask for plain language answers about activation, alerts, contacts, battery care, water resistance, location, coverage, and cancellation. Check what support is

available if the device stops working or needs replacement. Read the terms carefully so there are no surprises later.

Finally, involve the older adult in the choice wherever possible. Let them handle the device, feel its weight, hear the voice function, and decide where they would keep it. An alarm works best when it feels like a useful tool rather than a symbol of losing independence. A calm, practical conversation can lead to a choice that fits both safety needs and personal comfort.