Choosing a medical alarm with GPS for an older family member in New Zealand

What to look for when a parent or grandparent lives alone

When an older relative lives independently, a simple phone call to check in stops being enough once mobility or memory starts to fade. A medical alarm with GPS gives both of you something concrete: a way for them to call for help from anywhere, and a way for you to know roughly where they are if they don't answer. But not every device does the same things, and the differences matter a lot once you rely on it daily. This article walks through the main points to check before you choose one for a New Zealand family member.

GPS accuracy and how it works in New Zealand conditions

GPS location sounds straightforward, but real performance depends on where the device spends most of its time. Open sky gives the best satellite lock, so a walk along a beach or a trip to the supermarket usually returns a clear position. Problems start inside shopping malls, under dense tree cover, or in houses with thick concrete walls. Some trackers supplement GPS with Wi-Fi location, which uses known wireless networks to narrow down a position when the satellite signal is weak. That combination matters for anyone who lives in a suburban house with a metal roof or in an apartment block. Ask whether the device uses assisted GPS (A-GPS) or standard GPS, because assisted systems can lock onto satellites faster and use less battery doing it.

Battery life and charging habits

A medical alarm is only useful when it has power. Most units run on a rechargeable battery that lasts anywhere from a day to several weeks, depending on how often the GPS pings and how many features run in the background. A device that constantly streams location data will drain quickly. Look for one that uses a power-saving mode when the wearer is at home, then switches to active tracking only when they move outside a set zone. Also check what happens when the battery is low. Some models send a notification to your phone; others just go quiet. For someone who forgets to plug things in, a unit with a charging dock that tops up overnight is far more practical than one that needs a cable plugged in each time.



Fall detection that doesn't cry wolf

Fall detection has become a standard feature, but the technology varies. The best systems use an accelerometer and a gyroscope to sense the angle and force of a fall, then automatically trigger an SOS alert if the person doesn't cancel it within a few seconds. The problem is false alarms. Bending over to pick something up, dropping the device, or even a sudden jolt from a car can set it off. Some devices let you adjust the sensitivity, which is worth doing during the first week so you find a balance between catching real falls and annoying the wearer. Also check whether the alert goes to a monitoring centre or straight to your phone. A direct call to you can be faster if you live nearby, but a monitoring centre is better if the person lives alone and you might be unavailable.

SOS alerts and how they reach someone who can help

The SOS button is the core of any medical alarm with GPS. When pressed, the device should send a notification that includes the wearer's name, their location, and a way for the responder to call them back. Some devices use a speakerphone so you can talk to the person through the device itself, which helps when they are confused or can't reach their phone. Two-way communication is one of those features that seems optional until you need it. If the device only

sends a text alert and the person can't describe where they are, you waste time guessing. Look for a unit that lets you speak to them directly through the built-in speaker and microphone.

Wearing options and everyday comfort

A device that sits in a drawer is useless. The wearing style has to fit the person's habits and physical limitations. Common options include a pendant on a lanyard, a clip-on that attaches to a belt or waistband, and a wristband similar to a fitness tracker. Pendants are easy to put on and take off, but they can swing and get caught on door handles. Wristbands stay put but may be uncomfortable for someone with arthritis or sensitive skin. Clip-ons work well for people who already wear a belt, but they can fall off if the clip is weak. Some people prefer a device that can be worn as a necklace during the day and placed on a bedside charger at night. The best approach is to let the wearer choose the style, because they are the one who will have to keep it on.



Mobile coverage and network compatibility in New Zealand

Most GPS trackers use a cellular network to send their location and alerts. In New Zealand, that means the device needs to work on either the Spark or Vodafone network, or both, depending on the region. Check whether the device uses a standard SIM card or an embedded eSIM. An eSIM can switch between networks automatically, which helps in rural areas where one carrier may have better coverage than another. Also check whether the device supports 4G or 5G, because 3G networks are being phased out and a tracker that relies on them will stop working soon. If the wearer spends time in a remote part of the country, ask about coverage maps for the specific area rather than assuming blanket coverage.

Monthly fees versus one-off costs

Many medical alarms require a monthly subscription for the SIM card and monitoring service. Those fees can add up over a few years, especially if the person on a fixed income is paying them. Some devices, including familyr.co.nz, avoid monthly charges by using a different model. When you compare options, look at the total cost over two or three years, not just the upfront price of the device. A device with no monthly fee may cost more initially but can be cheaper in the long run. Also check whether the subscription includes fall detection and two-way calling, because some plans charge extra for those features.

Wi-Fi location as a backup to GPS

Wi-Fi location is not the same as GPS. It uses the known positions of nearby Wi-Fi networks to estimate where the device is. This works well indoors, where GPS often fails, and it can be useful for determining whether the wearer is at home or at a regular location like a community centre. The accuracy depends on how many networks are in range and how often the device updates its Wi-Fi scan. Some devices combine GPS and Wi-Fi location into a single position report, which gives a more reliable picture than either method alone. If the wearer lives in a dense urban area with many overlapping networks, Wi-Fi location can be surprisingly precise. In a rural property with few neighbours, it may not help much, so GPS remains the primary method there.



Putting it together for your family

The right medical alarm with GPS balances reliability, ease of use, and cost in a way that fits one specific person. Start by thinking about where they spend their time, how comfortable they are with technology, and who will respond when an alert comes in. A device that works perfectly for a fit 70-year-old who walks daily may frustrate a 90-year-old with poor eyesight who never leaves the house. Talk to the person who will wear it, show them the options, and let them handle the device before you buy. If possible, test it in their home for a few days to see how the GPS and fall detection behave in their actual environment. familyr.co.nz is one example of a service that combines these features without ongoing fees, but the key is finding a unit that your family member will actually keep on and use.