What should families check before picking a personal medical alarm?

When a loved one lives alone or has health concerns that could lead to a fall or a sudden medical episode, a personal medical alarm can offer real peace of mind. But not every device works the same way, and choosing the wrong one can leave a person without help when they need it most. Families should ask the right questions before committing to a system, so that the device actually fits the person's daily life, health risks, and comfort with technology.

The first thing to think about is how the alarm is triggered. Many modern devices include automatic fall detection, which can be a lifesaver if the person is knocked unconscious or cannot press a button. But fall detection is not perfect. Some systems use accelerometers and gyroscopes to sense a sudden impact and a change in angle, while others rely on a simple button press. Ask whether the device uses both methods. If the person is prone to fainting or has a condition that causes sudden collapses, automatic detection is worth prioritising. If they are steady on their feet but worry about a slow decline, a button-based system might be enough. Also ask about false alarms. A device that goes off every time someone bends down to tie a shoe can become annoying and lead to the alarm being ignored or turned off.

Another key question is how the device connects to the monitoring centre. Some systems use a landline phone connection, others use a cellular network, and a growing number use a built-in SIM card that works over 4G or 5G. In New Zealand, mobile coverage varies between regions, especially in rural or hilly areas. Check whether the device uses a network that has strong coverage where the person lives. If the home has no landline, a cellular device is the obvious choice. Also ask what happens if the power goes out. Some units have a backup battery that lasts for hours or even days, while others stop working as soon as the mains power fails. For someone living alone, a device that keeps working during a power cut is a basic requirement.



Battery life matters more than most people realise. A personal medical alarm that needs to be recharged every night might be forgotten, or the person might not have the dexterity to plug it in. Look for a device that runs for weeks or months on a single charge, or one that uses a standard coin-cell battery that lasts for a year or more. Some devices come with a charging cradle that the user places the device in overnight, which can work well if the person is in the habit of doing so. But for someone with memory issues, a long-life battery is safer. Also ask whether the device gives a low-battery warning, and whether that warning is audible, visual, or sent to a family member's phone. A quiet beep under a pillow is easily missed.

Water resistance is another factor that families often overlook. Many falls happen in the bathroom, where floors are wet and surfaces are slippery. A device that cannot get wet is useless in that situation. Look for a water-resistance rating of at least IP67, which means the device can be submerged in one metre of water for up to 30 minutes. Some devices are splash-proof but not fully waterproof, so check the specification carefully. A waterproof pendant can be worn in the shower without worry, which is important because that is exactly when a person might slip.

The range of the device is also worth considering. Some personal medical alarms only work inside the home, while others have a range that extends into the garden or the garage. If the person spends time outdoors gardening, walking the dog, or just sitting on the deck, the alarm needs to work there too. Ask about the range from the base unit and whether the device uses

GPS or cellular triangulation to work outside the home. For someone who lives alone but is still active, a device that works both indoors and outdoors provides much better protection.

Ease of use is critical, especially for older adults who may not be comfortable with technology. The device should have a large, easy-to-press button that does not require fine motor skills. Some pendants have a raised button that can be pressed with a palm or an elbow if the hands are injured. The device should also be comfortable to wear. A bulky pendant that digs into the skin or gets caught on clothing will be taken off and left in a drawer. Look for a lightweight design with a soft strap or a clip that can attach to a belt or a pocket. Some people prefer a wristband-style device, though these can be harder to press with the other hand. Let the person test the device before buying, if possible, to make sure they can operate it without frustration.



Two-way communication is a feature that deserves special attention. With two-way calling, the monitoring centre can speak directly to the person through the device after an alarm is triggered. This allows the operator to assess the situation, ask if the person is okay, and call emergency services or a family member as needed. Without two-way communication, the device can only send an alert and the family is left wondering what happened. The FamilyR Medical Alarm two way medical alarm is one example of a system that includes this capability, allowing a live operator to talk to the person through the pendant itself. This can reduce the number of false alarms and ensure that help is dispatched quickly when it is actually needed. When comparing devices, ask whether the two-way call is clear even if the person is in the bathroom or at the far end of the house.

Another practical question is how family members are notified. Some systems send an automatic text message or email to a list of contacts when an alarm is triggered. Others require family members to log into a web portal or an app. The best systems send an alert immediately, along with the person's location if GPS is available. Ask whether multiple family members can be added to the notification list and whether the system can call them in sequence until someone answers. For a family that lives far apart, this feature can be the difference between a quick response and a long wait.

Cost is always a concern, but the real question is what you get for the money. Some personal medical alarms charge a monthly subscription fee that covers monitoring, while others have a one-time purchase price with no ongoing costs. The FamilyR Medical Alarm two way medical alarm is an example of a system that offers monitoring without monthly fees, which can be a big help for families on a tight budget. But be careful: a low upfront cost might mean a poor-quality device or a monitoring centre that is understaffed. Ask about the monitoring centre's response time and whether it is staffed 24/7. Also ask whether the device can be tested regularly to make sure it still works. A device that cannot be tested is a risk.

Finally, think about the future. A person's health and mobility can change over time. A device that works well today might not be suitable in a year or two. Look for a system that can be upgraded or that offers different accessories, such as a wall-mounted panic button or a bed sensor. Some systems can be integrated with smart home devices like voice assistants, which can add another layer of safety. The more flexible the system, the longer it will remain useful.



Choosing a personal medical alarm is not just about the device itself. It is about matching the technology to the person who will use it. By asking these questions and involving the person in the decision, families can find a system that provides real protection without being a burden. A few hours of research now can prevent a lot of worry later.