

The Senior-Friendly Guide to Medical Alert Systems

By The Reviews.com Staff

What is a medical alert system?

On the surface, medical alert systems are pretty simple: Push a button and get help. But the number of options can be overwhelming. Do you need a device that you wear all the time? Should you get one that works outside of the house? How do you know which companies will be there for you if an emergency does occur?



Despite the array of products on the market, all medical alert systems work the same way. You wear a device with a button around your neck or wrist. Once it's pressed, it sends a signal to a larger base system, which calls a pre-programmed number. This is usually the company's call center, but some devices let you set it up with a family member or caregiver instead.

Once the call center receives your signal, the operator calls back through the base system where you can direct them on next steps: Call an ambulance, family member, neighbor, or simply tell them it was a false alarm.

What's the benefit of a medical alert system?

While Life Alert's oft-mocked "I've fallen, and I can't get up!" commercial is still what most people think of when they hear the words "medical alert," these are truly life-saving products.

"In the case of a stroke or heart attack, getting immediate help is critical. Seconds matter," Dr. Kori Novak, a gerontologist and researcher at Oxford University explained. "The push of a button that alerts help and gets them there 3 minutes faster can be the difference between not only life and death, but life with limited function versus returning to where they were."

But even outside of emergency situations, the greatest benefit provided by medical alert systems might be the sense of security they offer. Every elder care expert we spoke to emphasized how these devices provide peace of mind for seniors and their family members. “It’s not supposed to be a monitoring device that impedes them, but something that increases their quality of life,” Dr. Novak said.

Jonathan Marsh, owner of in-home senior care company, Home Helpers of Bradenton, agreed, saying, “I believe strongly in medical alert services and the idea that they can be a key component of any care plan, giving both confidence and peace of mind to not only seniors but also their families.”

Who should consider using a medical alert system?

Anyone with a chronic medical condition

Medical alert systems are critical for anyone dealing with debilitating pain or a chronic medical condition. “If there is a degenerative neurocognitive disease such as dementia or Alzheimer’s this is a great tool,” Dr. Novak said. Similarly, chronic pain conditions can make it especially difficult to get up after a fall.

The experts we spoke with emphasized that these devices are even more indispensable for anyone living alone with these conditions. “Having a medical alert device will give them confidence that help is available at the touch of a button,” Marsh told us.

Anyone at risk of falling

Those who don't suffer from a chronic condition should still consider potential risks. Accidents can happen at any time, and the older we get, the harder it is to bounce back from them.

Dr. Novak echoed this, saying, "Medical systems are **not** just for the frail elderly. Anyone who has a chronic disease or chronic or debilitating pain should consider purchasing a system. The relatively small cost is worth the potential peace of mind and life-saving minutes if an accident were to occur."

Anyone recuperating from a surgery or injury

Recovering from surgery or injury as a senior can be a long and difficult process. Our body requires more time to heal the older we get, and soreness and trouble walking can often linger for weeks, making serious falls more likely.

A good medical alert system can provide extra comfort and security during recovery. Marsh emphasized this point for seniors who are living alone, saying, "This is especially important if the individual is recovering at home and a caregiver is not present around the clock."

Seniors living alone

If you're one of the 11.3 million older adults in America who live alone, a medical alert system can be your best lifeline. Even if you're completely healthy, living alone means it could be difficult to get assistance if an accident does happen.

Marsh listed “a negative reaction to a medication, choking, chest pains, dizziness, and even something as simple as being locked out of the home” as reasons seniors living alone could benefit from a device.

How to discuss getting a medical alert device with a family member

This can be a difficult conversation, but it’s important to have an open dialogue. That’s not to say it’s always met with resistance, but it’s a good idea to prepare no matter what.

Scott Knoll, MSW and owner of in-home senior care agency By Your Side Home Care, told us, “In general, most senior citizens are receptive to these devices – especially if using it allows them to stay in their own home.”

Our elder care experts recommend a few strategies to keep in mind when discussing medical alert systems with a family member.

Be proactive rather than reactive

Before you even begin, the circumstances surrounding the conversation can have a big impact on the outcome. Marsh recommends starting the dialogue sooner rather than later: “I always recommend approaching the conversation with a little thought and preparation. Try to have the conversation before there is an immediate need or cause for intervention.”

This can help everyone feel less defensive going in. Dr. Novak agrees: “It’s important that caregivers or family members are honest and start the conversation when their loved ones are not anxious or upset.”

Make it about yourself, not them

No one wants to be told that they don’t know what’s best for themselves, so one effective tactic is to shift the focus onto yourself. “Instead of saying, ‘I’m worried that you’re getting ill and something might happen to you,’ consider reframing your concern for the family as a whole: ‘You know I am a worrier, I would feel so much better if you would consider using one of these systems,’” Dr. Novak advised. “This can make it feel less like the loved one needs it because there is something concerning about them, and more that the family needs it to feel confident.”

Approach the subject with sensitivity and kindness

This is absolutely the most important thing you can do to make this a positive conversation. It’s not easy for everyone to confront the fact that they might need help, so the more compassionate and understanding you can be, the better. “Explain that this device in no way suggests a lack of respect, but is a way to ensure the safety of someone important to you,” Scott Knoll told us.

Ask questions

One of the best ways to keep things non-confrontational is to ask simple questions about your family member’s wants and needs, or things they love to do and want to continue doing.

“Asking a loved one ‘Is there any help you need around the house?’ can start a conversation that leads to things around the home they may find more challenging,” Jonathan Marsh advised. “His or her needs and wants to live securely and independently will unfold naturally and comfortably during the conversation.”

What should you look for when shopping?

Consult your physician first

Before you start shopping around, talk to your family member’s doctor about their needs. “A physician who knows the individual is best able to determine if a medical alert device is a good course to pursue,” Scott Knoll told us. If there are specific features you’ll need out of a medical alert system, your doctor will be able to give you the heads up.

Because the devices take some practice to set up and use properly, they’re not a good fit for every situation. Stephanie Erickson, family caregiving expert and host with [thismatters2Media](#), told us, “If someone has advanced cognitive deficits, they may not be able to understand or use the device appropriately.” In these cases, an alternate care path should be considered.

Remember: Everyone’s needs are different

Learning what’s essential and what’s irrelevant to your family’s situation is a key step in finding the right system. “It’s not necessary to go with the service that has all the bells and whistles. It’s most important to consider the individual and what his or her needs are,” Marsh said.

The AARP's guide to medical alert systems echoes this advice: "When selecting a medical alert system, start by evaluating your loved one's specific needs and abilities — both now and how they might change in the future. For example, if she has dementia, would she understand how to operate a system? Or is something automatic, like a fall-detection device, more appropriate? Does she have a disorder, such as aphasia, that will make communicating with a call center difficult?"

Customer service is key

In our recent review of the best medical alert systems, we found that customer service was the best barometer of a good or bad provider. Some companies have local offices that send out service technicians to help you install the device, while others ship them directly to you, with assistance available over the phone.

We recommend spending some time on the phone with a company's reps before committing to a purchase. Support from knowledgeable, patient, and empathetic service reps could make a huge difference in an emergency.

Seek out a free trial

All of our elder care experts emphasized the importance of a free trial period for medical alert systems. "You or your loved one can get used to how the system works," Dr. Novak says. "It's also good because you don't pay for something that doesn't work — perhaps your wifi isn't strong enough or you're in a rural or congested urban area."

Stephanie Erickson echoes this, saying, “A trial period is helpful as it allows the family and user to evaluate if that device has all of the features to help a particular situation or risk. Many systems do different things and sometimes we don’t know what we need or don’t need without trying it out.”

Still, the lack of a free trial shouldn’t necessarily disqualify a company from consideration. Scott Knoll tells us, “While a free trial of the system can prove beneficial, it is by no means the only litmus test for a reputable product. Some excellent medical alert systems companies don’t offer free trials.”

Look for transparent pricing

Unfortunately, any industry that targets seniors is going to have its share of scams. Finding a company that’s upfront about its fees is essential.

“Look for a company that transparently lists prices and services on their website – while not requiring a lock-in contract. Inquire by phone about the system you’re considering and simply ask the agent of the company to guarantee a service price and contract status,” Knoll explains.

We can personally attest to the importance of this step. In our testing, several companies tacked on surprise, \$50 “activation fees” without any explanation.

The AARP seconded this advice in their guide, saying, “Beware of complicated pricing plans and hidden fees. Look for a company with no extra fees related to equipment, shipping, installation, activation, or service and repair. Don’t fall for scams that offer free service or ‘donated or used’ equipment.”

Consider companies with short contracts

Along the same lines as transparent pricing, look for companies that don’t try to lock you into lengthy contracts. The AARP is adamant about this: “You should not have to enter into a long-term contract. You should only have to pay ongoing monthly fees, which should range between \$25 and \$45 a month.”

What kind of features do you need?

Range

There are two types of medical alert systems:

- *Portable devices that only work when within a certain distance of the base unit, similar to a cordless phone.*
- *Truly mobile devices that allow you to receive support from anywhere using GPS location tracking, similar to a cell phone.*

If your family member spends a lot of time outside the house, a mobile system is the better option. We tested nine of the top models in our review of the best medical alert systems for active seniors.

If you go with a device meant to be used in the home, make sure that the working range is wide enough to work with your lifestyle.

Fall detection

If falls are a specific concern for your family member, devices with built-in fall detection features can provide some extra peace of mind. The response is typically the same as if you pushed the help button: Your provider will quickly call the command center to see if any additional help is needed.

Since fall detection relies on sensors and accelerometers, the likelihood of false alarms is fairly high. Many companies will only respond if no movement is detected after the fall detection is triggered, designed for situations if you're knocked unconscious. This feature can be especially helpful if you're prone to memory loss or loss of consciousness.

Device size

The size of the device, along with how it's worn, is one of the most crucial factors to consider when shopping around. Remember, your family member will have to wear this thing 24/7. The more comfortable it is, the more likely they'll be to stick with it.



Devices can generally be worn in three ways: around the neck, on the wrist, or clipped onto clothing. If you can, have your family member test it out for a few days before buying to make sure it's a good fit.

Two-way communication

There are two ways to communicate with your provider's emergency response team when an alarm is triggered: Some devices allow you to speak through the device on the person, while others only have those features in the base system.

All of our experts recommended using the former whenever possible. If one were to fall in a bedroom or bathroom away from the base unit, for instance, it would be impossible to communicate with emergency personnel. Having that communication capability built into the device lets both sides respond to the situation immediately.

AARP's guide recommends asking specific questions about each company's response procedures before committing:

- *Does the company operate its own response center or contract externally?*
- *Is the response center certified?*
- *How are the dispatchers or operators trained, and are they able to communicate in your loved one's preferred language?*
- *Will your loved one be able to talk with a live person via their wearable device, or do they need to be close to the base unit to be heard?*

Battery life

Most modern medical alert devices charge through a wall plug but also contain backup batteries in case of emergency. These batteries usually last around thirty hours, and will usually need to be replaced every 18 months or so.

Be mindful of how long the device lasts on a single charge, how to properly recharge it, and how to tell if the backup batteries need to be replaced.

Custom care plans

Understanding what happens when you press the “Help” button is critical to getting the most out of a device. The best providers allow you to create a customized care plan involving emergency contacts, family members, and doctors. “Not all situations should require that emergency personnel come to the person’s home,” Marsh said. “Some situations may possibly be resolved by calling a nearby emergency contact.”

Fast response times

In an emergency medical situation, every second counts. How long it takes for the response center to contact you is a key measure of any medical alert system. “Average response times should be very quick, in the area of 30 to 45 seconds after pushing the button,” Marsh advised. In our medical alert systems review, we found only one company, Medical Guardian, consistently hit this 30-second target, while others took as long as two minutes.

Waterproof wearables

According to the CDC, over 60% of falls occur in the bathtub or shower, making waterproof devices a must. This is pretty standard in most modern systems, but it's worth verifying with the provider if you're unsure.

Our medical alert reviews

[The Best Medical Alert System](#)

[The Best Medical Alert System for Active Seniors](#)

Reviews.com has created this guide to be accessible and reader-friendly, with larger font and compatibility with screen-reader technology. The printable PDF version makes it a useful tool even for those who can't access the internet.