How to set up emergency contacts for an older relative

When an older relative lives alone or spends time at home without someone nearby, knowing they can reach help fast brings real peace of mind. A family emergency alert system that connects them directly to the people who care about them can make that possible. But the system is only as good as the contact list behind it. Setting up emergency contacts properly means thinking through who gets notified, how they receive the alert, and what happens if the first person doesn't answer.

This guide walks through the practical steps to build a reliable network around your older relative, so that when they press a button or the system detects a fall, the right people respond quickly.

Step 1: Choose the primary contacts

The first decision is who receives the alert. Most systems let you list several people, but one or two should be the primary contacts. These are the people most likely to answer a call or text at any hour. Think about who lives closest, who has a flexible schedule, and who your relative feels most comfortable with. It might be an adult child who lives ten minutes away, or a neighbour who checks in regularly.

Be realistic about availability. Someone who works night shifts or travels often might not be the best primary contact, even if they are the most obvious choice. Consider listing two primary contacts so that if the first doesn't respond, the alert automatically goes to the second. This prevents a single missed call from leaving your relative without help.

Step 2: Build a secondary contact list

Beyond the primary contacts, add secondary people who can step in if the primary contacts are unreachable. This might include another family member, a trusted friend, or even a neighbour who has a key. The goal is to create a chain of people, so the alert keeps escalating until someone confirms they can help.



When building this list, think about the different times of day when help might be needed. A weekday morning might be fine for a working family member, but a weekend evening might require someone else. Include contacts who cover different time slots and different types of support. Some systems allow you to set schedules, so the right people get notified at the right times.

Step 3: Collect accurate contact details

This sounds obvious, but it's easy to get wrong. Double-check every phone number and email address. A single wrong digit can mean an alert goes nowhere. Test each contact method by sending a test alert or simply calling the number to confirm it works. For older relatives who

use email, make sure the address is one they check regularly, not an old account they abandoned years ago.

Also confirm that each contact person knows they are on the list. No one should be surprised by an SOS alert. Explain to each person what the alert means, what they should do when they receive it, and how to contact the older relative directly if the alert is unclear. A brief conversation upfront prevents confusion later.

Step 4: Set up the alert preferences

Most family emergency alert systems let you choose how contacts are notified. Common options include SMS text messages, phone calls, and app notifications. Think about what each contact is most likely to notice and respond to. A text message might be perfect for someone who always has their phone in hand, while a phone call might be better for someone who doesn't check texts often.

For the older relative themselves, consider how they will trigger the alert. Many systems include an SOS button on a wearable device, a pendant, or a wristband. Some also offer fall detection that automatically sends an alert if a fall is detected. Explain to your relative how to use the device and when to press the button. Practice together so they feel confident.

The system should be configured so that alerts sent to trusted family are immediate and clear. A good alert includes the older relative's name, the type of alert (SOS, fall, or low battery), and their location if GPS is available. This lets the contact person assess the situation quickly and decide what to do.



Step 5: Test the entire system

Once the contacts are set and the preferences are configured, run a full test. Ask your relative to press the SOS button or trigger a test alert from the device. Watch what happens on your phone. Does the SMS arrive? Does the phone ring? Does the app show the alert? Each contact should receive the alert and confirm they saw it.

Testing also reveals any gaps in the chain. Maybe the first primary contact doesn't answer because they were in a meeting. The system should then escalate to the secondary contact within a reasonable time. If it doesn't, you may need to adjust the timing or add another contact. Run the test at different times of day to see how the system behaves under different conditions.

Step 6: Review and update regularly

People's lives change. A contact who was available last year might now be travelling frequently. A phone number might change without notice. Set a reminder every three or six months to review the contact list and update it. Ask each person if their details are still correct and if they are still comfortable being a contact.

Also check in with your older relative. Their preferences might shift. They might feel more comfortable with a different primary contact now, or they might want to add a new neighbour they have grown close to. Keep the conversation open and non-judgmental. The goal is to keep the system working for them, not to stick with a list that no longer fits.

What to watch out for

One common mistake is relying on too few contacts. If only one person is listed and that person is unavailable, the alert goes nowhere. Always have at least two primary contacts and a few secondary ones. Another mistake is not telling contacts what to do when they receive an alert. A text that says "Your mother has pressed her SOS button" is useless if the recipient doesn't know whether to call her, drive over, or contact emergency services. Give each contact clear instructions: call the older relative first, then decide if you need to go there or call 111.

Also watch out for alert fatigue. If contacts receive too many false alarms, they might start ignoring the alerts. Explain to your relative how to avoid accidental triggers, and remind contacts that even if an alert turns out to be a mistake, it is always better to respond than to assume it's nothing. Some systems let you set a delay before the alert goes out, giving the older relative a chance to cancel a false alarm.



Finally, consider how the system integrates with emergency services. In New Zealand, if the situation is urgent, the contact person can call 111. Some systems also offer two-way voice, which lets the contact talk directly to the older relative through the device. This can help assess the situation without rushing over. If your system includes two-way voice, make sure both the older relative and the contacts know how to use it.

A well-set-up family emergency alert system does more than just send a notification. It creates a reliable response network that gives your older relative independence and gives you peace of mind. By carefully choosing contacts, testing the system, and reviewing it regularly, you build a safety net that works when it matters most. The key is to think ahead, plan for different scenarios, and make sure that alerts sent to trusted family reach the right people every time.