Choosing a fall detection device for a senior family member

When an older relative lives alone or spends time out of the house, a personal alarm with fall detection can give everyone more peace of mind. The challenge is that different models work in different ways, and knowing what to compare will help you pick a device that actually gets used. This article walks through the main factors to consider, from how fall sensors work to what happens after an alert is sent.

Understand how fall detection actually works

Not all fall detection is the same. Some devices use an accelerometer that senses sudden changes in speed and orientation, while others also include a gyroscope to measure the wearer's angle. A good sensor will try to tell the difference between a fall and a quick movement like bending over or sitting down fast. Many devices now combine multiple sensors to reduce false alarms.

What to watch for: ask whether the device has automatic fall detection built in, or whether it only sends an alert when the wearer presses a button. Automatic detection is important if the person might be unconscious or unable to move after a fall. Also check whether the device lets you adjust the sensitivity. Some models let you choose a higher or lower threshold for triggering an alert, which can help if the wearer moves slowly or has a condition that causes sudden drops.

Check the type of location tracking

Location technology is a key part of any GPS personal alarm. Basic devices use GPS to give a position when an alert is sent, but the accuracy can vary. Some rely on mobile phone towers for a rough location, while others combine GPS with Wi-Fi positioning for better results indoors.



What to watch for: find out whether the device works indoors as well as outdoors. Many older homes have thick walls or metal roofs that can block a GPS signal. A device that uses a combination of GPS and cellular triangulation will usually give a more reliable location. If the alarm is meant to be used mainly at home, a device that relies on a base station may be enough. For someone who walks or travels regularly, a GPS personal alarm with continuous location updates is more useful.

Consider how the SOS alert reaches someone

An alarm is only helpful if someone responds quickly. Most devices send an alert to a monitoring centre or directly to family members through an app. The type of response you want will affect which device you choose.

What to watch for: find out whether the monitoring centre is staffed around the clock or only during business hours. Some services let you add multiple emergency contacts so that the alert goes to several people at once. Others rely on a single carer who might be unavailable. Two-way voice communication is a useful feature because it lets the responder talk directly to the wearer through the device and assess the situation before sending help. Without voice, the responder only sees a location and may not know whether the alert is real.

Look at wearing options and daily comfort

A fall detection device only works if it is worn. Many older people dislike wearing a pendant around the neck because it can feel uncomfortable or get caught on furniture. Wristbands are popular, but some people find them too bulky or sweaty. A few devices can clip onto a belt or be worn as a brooch.

What to watch for: check the size and weight of the device. A heavy pendant may be left on the bedside table. Also check whether the device is waterproof or water-resistant. Showers and bathrooms are common places for falls, so a device that cannot get wet is a serious limitation. Some devices come with a lanyard that breaks away under pressure for safety, which matters if the wearer could be caught by the cord.

Compare monthly fees and total cost over time

The price of a fall detection device is not just the upfront cost. Many systems charge a monthly monitoring fee that can add up over the years. Some providers charge a separate activation fee or require a long-term contract. Others, like familyr.co.nz, offer a device with no monthly fee, which can make the total cost clearer from the start.



What to watch for: look at the total cost over the expected life of the device. A cheap device with a high monthly fee may cost more in the long run than a more expensive device with no recurring charges. Also check what is included in the fee: some services charge extra for features like GPS tracking or fall detection. Read the terms carefully to see whether the price can increase after the first year.

Examine the warranty and support options

Fall detection devices are electronic items that can stop working or get damaged. A good warranty gives you confidence that the device will be replaced or repaired if it fails. Support is also important when you need help setting up the device or troubleshooting a problem.

What to watch for: check the length of the warranty and what it covers. Some warranties exclude water damage or accidental drops. Also check how you get support: is there a phone line, email, or live chat? Some providers only offer support during business hours, which may not help if something goes wrong on a weekend. If the device uses a mobile network, ask what happens if the network is upgraded or shut down. A device that relies on 3G, for example, will stop working when that network is retired.

Test the setup and daily use before committing

Some devices are simple to set up out of the box, while others require a professional installer. The ease of everyday use matters even more. If the wearer has trouble pressing small buttons or reading a screen, a device with a single large SOS button may be best.

What to watch for: find out whether the device needs to be charged every day or can go for several days on a single charge. A device that requires frequent charging might be forgotten or left uncharged. Also check whether the device has a battery indicator that is easy to see. Some models send a low-battery alert to the carer's phone, which is helpful for those who do not live nearby.

Think about future needs

As a person gets older, their needs may change. A device that works well today might not be suitable in a few years. For example, someone who is active now may later need a device with longer battery life or a simpler interface. Some devices can be upgraded with new features, while others need to be replaced entirely.



What to watch for: choose a device that can be used in different settings. Some models work both at home and away from home, while others are designed for one location. Also consider whether the device can be used by someone with memory loss or dementia. A device that is easy to forget may need a reminder system or a feature that alerts the carer if the device has not been moved for a while.

Bringing it all together

Comparing fall detection devices does not have to be overwhelming. Focus on what matters most for your situation: automatic fall detection, reliable location tracking, a response system that works when you need it, and a wearing style that the person will actually use. Also consider the total cost, warranty, and ease of setup. By working through these points one at a time, you can find a device that fits both the wearer and the family's needs. A good personal alarm is one that is worn, trusted, and backed by a service that responds quickly. If you want to explore a device with no monthly fees, you can look at what familyr.co.nz offers as part of your research.