Choosing a GPS Tracker for an Older Relative: What to Look For

When an older family member starts to lose some independence or has health concerns that make you worry, a GPS tracker can be a reassuring tool. These devices have moved beyond simple location sharing: many now include fall detection, SOS alerts, and other features that help keep a person safe while letting them go about their day. But picking the right one for your situation takes some thought. The market has many options, and not every device suits every lifestyle or level of tech comfort. This article walks through the main steps to consider when choosing a GPS tracker for an elderly family member, focusing on the practical features that matter most.

Start with the basics: what does the tracker actually do?

Most GPS trackers for seniors share a core set of functions: they show the wearer's location on a map, usually via a phone app or a web portal. Some also use Wi-Fi positioning to improve accuracy indoors, where GPS signals can be weak. This matters if your relative lives in a multi-story building or spends a lot of time at home. A tracker that combines GPS and Wi-Fi location gives a more reliable picture of where someone is, whether they are in the garden or at the local shops.

Beyond location, many models add safety features. Fall detection, for instance, uses built-in sensors to recognise a sudden drop or impact. When a fall is detected, the device can automatically send an alert to a family member or a monitoring service. This can be critical if the person is unable to press a button or call for help. An SOS alert, usually activated by pressing a button on the device, lets the wearer manually signal that they need assistance. Two-way communication, where the device has a speaker and microphone, allows a family member or carer to talk to the person directly through the tracker, which can help calm a situation or provide instructions until help arrives.

Think about the person who will wear it

Before you start comparing models, take a close look at the older person's daily routine and abilities. A tracker that works well for someone who is still active and goes for walks may not suit someone who is mostly at home and has trouble remembering to charge devices. If the person is forgetful, a long battery life and a simple wearing option become more important. If they are prone to wandering or have memory issues, a tracker with a reliable geofence alert - which sends a notification if they leave a set area - can be very useful.

Also talk to the person about the device. Some older adults are happy to wear a pendant or a smartwatch, while others may feel it labels them as frail. A tracker that clips onto a belt or fits into a pocket might be more acceptable. The goal is to find something they will actually keep on them, not leave in a drawer. If the device looks too medical or is uncomfortable, it will not get used.



Check the battery life and how it recharges

Battery life varies widely between GPS trackers. Some need charging every day, while others can last a week or more on a single charge. For a senior who may forget to plug in a device, a longer battery life is a real advantage. Look for a tracker that gives a clear low-battery warning, either on the device itself or through the app. Some models also come with a charging cradle or a magnetic cable that is easier to use than fumbling with a small plug.

One thing to watch for: a device that uses lots of real-time location updates will drain the battery faster. Some trackers let you adjust how often they report, so you can balance battery life with the level of monitoring you want. If you only need location checks a few times a day, you can set the tracker to ping less often and extend the time between charges.

Consider the mobile coverage and connectivity

GPS trackers rely on a mobile network - usually 2G, 3G, 4G or 5G - to send location data and alerts to your phone. In New Zealand, coverage can vary between regions, especially in rural or hilly areas. Before you choose a tracker, check which mobile networks it works on and whether that network has good coverage where your relative lives and spends time. A tracker that loses signal in a certain part of town is not much help.

Some trackers also use Wi-Fi for indoor positioning. This can be a useful backup if mobile coverage is patchy inside the home. If the device supports both GPS and Wi-Fi, you get a more complete picture of where the person is, even if they are in a building with thick walls or a basement.

Look at the monthly fees

Many GPS trackers come with a monthly subscription fee for the SIM card or the monitoring service. These fees can add up over time, especially if you are on a fixed budget. Some devices, however, offer a no-monthly-fee model: you buy the tracker once and there is no ongoing cost. This can be a big saving in the long run, but it is important to check what is included. Does the no-fee model still give you location updates, alerts, and access to the app? Or are some features locked behind a paywall?

Be clear on what you are paying for. Some trackers that advertise no monthly fees may still need you to buy a separate SIM card or pay for a data plan. Others include all the core functions in the one-off purchase. Understanding the total cost over a year or two helps you compare options fairly.

Evaluate the fall detection and SOS features

Fall detection is a key reason many families choose a GPS tracker. But not all fall detection works the same way. Some devices use an accelerometer and a gyroscope to detect a sudden change in motion and orientation. When a fall is detected, the tracker sends an alert. How accurate is it? Some models are better at distinguishing a fall from a sudden movement like sitting down quickly or dropping the device. False alarms can be annoying, but a device that never alerts when a real fall happens is worse.



Look for a tracker that lets you set the sensitivity of the fall detection, or one that has been tested in real-world conditions. Some devices also combine fall detection with a manual SOS button, so the person can call for help even if the fall is not detected automatically. Two-way communication is another useful addition: if the tracker has a speaker and microphone, you can talk to the person through the device and assess the situation before deciding what to do.

One of the key features families should look for in a GPS tracker with fall detection is how the alert is delivered. Does it go to a family member's phone via an app, or does it call a monitoring centre? Some trackers let you set a list of emergency contacts, who all get notified at the same time. Others send a text message or an email. Think about who will be available to respond and what method works best for your family.

Think about the wearing options

The best tracker is the one that gets worn. If the device is a smartwatch, does the person already wear a watch? If not, a pendant or a clip-on device might be a better fit. Some seniors find a pendant comfortable and easy to use, especially if it has a large SOS button. Others prefer something that sits on a belt or in a pocket, so it is less visible.

Water resistance is another practical point. If the person wears the tracker in the shower or while washing dishes, it needs to be waterproof, not just splash-proof. Check the IP rating: look for something like IP67 or IP68, which means it can survive being submerged. Also consider how the device attaches. A strong clip or a breakaway lanyard can prevent the tracker from being lost if it gets caught on something.

Check the app and how easy it is to use

The tracker is only as good as the app or website you use to monitor it. If the interface is confusing or slow, you may not use it as often as you should. Look for an app that gives you a clear map view, shows the battery level, and lets you set up geofences and alerts easily. Some apps also offer a location history, so you can see where the person has been over the past hours or days. This can be helpful if they wander or if you want to check their routine.

Another thing to test is how the alert works. When a fall is detected or an SOS button is pressed, how quickly do you get the notification? Does the app send a push notification, or do you need to keep checking? Some trackers also let you call the device directly from the app, which can be reassuring if the person is confused or upset.

Consider the overall reliability and support

A GPS tracker is a device you rely on in an emergency, so reliability matters. Read reviews from other families who have used the tracker in similar situations. Look for comments about battery life, signal strength, and how well the fall detection works in practice. Also check what kind of support the company offers. Is there a phone number or email you can contact if the device stops working? Do they have a warranty or a return policy? Some companies also offer a setup service or online guides to help you get started.



Another of the key features families should look for is how the device handles power outages or network disruptions. Some trackers have a backup battery or can store location data and send it later when the signal returns. This can be important if your relative lives in an area with occasional mobile network outages.

Make a decision that fits your family

Choosing a GPS tracker for an elderly family member is not about finding the most expensive or the most feature-packed model. It is about matching the device to the person's needs, your budget, and the practical realities of daily life. Start by thinking about what matters most: is it fall detection, long battery life, no monthly fees, or ease of use? Then compare a few models

that meet those priorities. If you can, try the device out yourself before giving it to your relative, so you know how it works and can help them get comfortable with it.

A good tracker should give you peace of mind without making the person feel constantly watched. The best ones work quietly in the background, only drawing attention when something is wrong. With the right choice, you can support your family member's independence while staying connected and informed.