Key features to look for in a medical alarm for an older adult

What matters most when choosing a medical alarm

Medical alarms have become simpler and more capable in recent years, but the range of options can make it hard to know what really matters. For an older adult who wants to stay independent at home or while out and about, the right device needs to balance ease of use, reliability, and practical coverage. The goal is a system that works without fuss when it is needed most, and that does not create extra costs or confusion in daily life. Below are the main points to check before deciding.

Ease of wearing and carrying

A medical alarm is only useful if the person actually wears it. That sounds obvious, but many devices end up in a drawer because the form factor does not suit the user. Look at how the alarm can be worn. Common options include a **wristband**, a **lanyard** around the neck, a **belt clip**, or a small unit that attaches to a **keyring**. Each has its trade-offs.

A wristband is often the most convenient for someone who does not want to think about putting it on each day. It stays on like a watch and is always within reach. A lanyard is easy to access but can be uncomfortable for some people, especially if they have neck or shoulder sensitivity. A belt clip works well for those who always wear a belt or waistband, but it can be less practical for someone who moves between sitting and standing frequently. A keyring attachment is a backup option, but it is not ideal as a primary device because it may not be on the person at all times. The best choice is the one the user will actually keep on their body throughout the day and night.

Fall detection that works in real life

Automatic fall detection is one of the most valuable features in a modern medical alarm. It means the device can call for help even if the person is unconscious or unable to press a button. But not all fall detection is the same. The key is how the device distinguishes a real fall from everyday movements such as bending over, sitting down quickly, or dropping the device itself.

Look for a system that uses multiple sensors - accelerometers, gyroscopes, and sometimes barometric pressure sensors - to detect the impact and change in orientation that a fall causes. Some devices also include **sensitivity settings** that let you adjust how easily the alarm triggers. This is important because a system that is too sensitive will cause false alarms, which can be

frustrating and lead the user to ignore or disable the feature. A system that is not sensitive enough may miss a real fall. The ideal device allows some customisation so it can be tuned to the person's activity level and mobility.



Location tracking and coverage area

For an older adult who spends time outside the home, location tracking is a major consideration. A medical alarm that works only inside the house is limited. Devices with built-in GPS can pinpoint the user's location anywhere within **GPS coverage**, which is essential if they wander or become disoriented while out walking, visiting friends, or running errands.

A GPS personal alarm uses satellite signals to determine where the user is, then transmits that information to a monitoring centre or directly to family members via an app. This means help can be sent to the exact spot, even if the person cannot explain where they are. Check that the device uses a reliable GPS chipset and that it works in your local area - some devices are designed for specific regions and may not perform well abroad or in rural zones. Also consider whether the device uses cellular networks (4G or 5G) to send its location, and whether those networks have good coverage where the user lives and travels.

The second important point about a **GPS personal alarm** is that it removes the need for a landline. Many older adults have given up their home phone or live in a home that does not have a phone jack. A GPS-based alarm works independently of a home phone line, which makes it much more flexible and future-proof.

Battery life and charging habits

A medical alarm that runs out of battery is no alarm at all. Battery life varies widely between devices. Some need charging every day, while others can go for a week or more on a single charge. The charging method also matters. A device that uses a proprietary charger can be a problem if the charger is lost or broken. A device that charges via a standard USB cable is easier to replace and more convenient for travel.

Think about the user's routine. Will they remember to charge the device every night? For some people, a device with a very long battery life reduces the risk of forgetting. Others prefer a device that gives clear low-battery alerts, either through a sound, a vibration, or a notification sent to a family member's phone. Some devices also come with a charging dock that makes it easy to place the alarm on charge without fumbling with cables.

Two-way voice communication

When an alarm is triggered, being able to talk to a responder directly from the device is a huge advantage. Two-way voice communication means the user can speak to a monitoring centre operator or a family member through the device's built-in speaker and microphone, without needing to reach a separate phone. This is particularly valuable after a fall, when the person may be on the floor and unable to get up to answer a landline.



Check the audio quality of the device. Is the speaker loud enough to hear in a noisy environment? Is the microphone sensitive enough to pick up a voice from across the room? Some devices have noise-cancelling features that help the responder hear the user even if there is background noise. Also consider whether the device allows the user to initiate a call themselves, not just respond to an incoming call from the monitoring centre.

Monthly fees and long-term costs

One of the biggest frustrations with traditional medical alarms is the ongoing monthly fee. Many systems charge a subscription that can add up to hundreds of dollars a year, often with a long-term contract. For an older adult on a fixed income, this can be a real burden. That is why a **medical alarm without monthly fees** is so appealing.

A device with no monthly fee means you pay once for the hardware and then use it without any recurring charges. This removes the stress of remembering to pay a bill every month and avoids the risk of the service being cut off if a payment is missed. It also makes the device a true one-off investment. When comparing devices, look carefully at the fine print. Some devices that claim to have no monthly fees may still charge for SIM card data, monitoring centre access, or app features. A genuinely fee-free device includes everything needed for the alarm to function - GPS tracking, fall detection, two-way voice, and emergency alerts - without any ongoing cost.

Another benefit of no monthly fees is that the device can be used by multiple family members or passed on to someone else if it is no longer needed. There is no contract to cancel and no penalty for stopping use. This flexibility is especially valuable for families who are caring for an older relative and want a simple, low-commitment solution.

Water resistance and durability

Medical alarms are worn on the body, so they are exposed to sweat, rain, hand washing, and accidental spills. A device that is not water-resistant can be damaged easily. Look for a water resistance rating of at least IP67 or IP68, which means the device can be submerged in water to a certain depth without harm. This is important because many falls happen in the bathroom, where water is present. A device that must be removed before showering or bathing is less likely to be worn consistently, which defeats its purpose.

Durability also matters for the device's housing and strap. A wristband should be made of a material that does not irritate the skin and can withstand daily wear. The buttons or touch interface should be easy to press, even for someone with reduced dexterity or arthritis. Some devices have a single large button that is hard to miss, which is simpler than a touchscreen that may be confusing in an emergency.



Emergency response and who gets alerted

How the device connects to help is another critical factor. Some alarms are linked to a professional monitoring centre that answers calls 24/7 and dispatches emergency services. Others send alerts directly to family members or caregivers via a smartphone app. Both approaches have their place, but the best choice depends on the user's situation.

A monitoring centre is ideal for someone who lives alone or has no nearby family. The centre can assess the situation and send an ambulance if needed. A family-alert system works well when a relative lives close by and can respond quickly. Some devices offer both options, allowing the user to set a priority list of contacts. Whichever system you choose, make sure the response process is clear and that the user feels confident using it.

Final checks before buying

Before making a decision, test the device in the environment where it will be used. Check that the GPS and cellular signals are strong in the home and in the areas the user visits. Confirm that the device's battery lasts long enough for the user's daily routine. And most importantly, ensure the user is comfortable wearing it and knows how to operate it. A medical alarm is a tool for peace of mind, but it only works if it is worn, charged, and understood. Taking the time to match the device to the person's habits and needs will pay off in the long run.