Choosing a high-tech alerting device

Look for waterproof gadgets that are easy to use, and companies that don’t require long-term contracts.

Medical alerting devices are effective tools for people who want to live independently and safely in their own homes. The wearable devices summon help immediately in a medical emergency, such as a bad fall, a stroke, or a heart attack. Unfortunately, the devices are underused. “Many older adults agree to use a device only after a medical emergency when they’ve been traumatized by the experience of being stuck in a bathtub, lying on the floor, or suffering from a cardiac or neurological event,” says Barbara Moscowitz, a geriatric social worker at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital.

Alerting systems

The alerting device is a lightweight button that’s worn on the wrist, like a watch, or around the neck, like a pendant. It can also be attached to a belt buckle or wheelchair. When you push the button, it signals a base unit connected to your phone, which contacts a monitoring center. Operators there will talk to you through a two-way speaker in the base unit or the pendant to find out the nature of the emergency, then dispatch paramedics and call your family members, even if you don’t respond.

Some newer devices are able to detect falls automatically, calling for help without the push of a button. Another innovation is a signal that the alert button sends the service provider when its battery is low, prompting the provider to send the wearer a replacement device. Some devices now feature global positioning systems (GPS) that use satellites to locate the wearer. And some have several buttons that also enable you to call loved ones in addition to the help center.

Where to start

There are dozens of medical alerting device companies, and your doctor or health care provider may have a recommendation. “Many hospital and home care systems have developed relationships with specific preferred providers, which they have determined provide good-quality service,” says Barbara Moscowitz, a geriatric social worker at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital.

ARE YOU READY FOR AN ALERTING SYSTEM?

Alerting devices are ideal for people who live alone or spend time alone during the day, as well as people who’ve experienced a fall in the past, have a medical condition, or are limited in mobility. Individuals with mild memory impairment should be given a device as early as possible; if you wait until the person is more impaired, the individual may not be able to learn how to wear and use the device properly.
Moscowitz. You can also ask friends, local paramedics, nursing homes, and pharmacists. If you’re overwhelmed by the many choices, consider going with a company that’s been in business a long time; those with proven track records are likely reliable.

**What to look for**

Compare the services and products of several different companies. You’ll want a company that doesn’t require a long-term contract—make sure you can cancel at any time without a fee—and companies that charge low or no fees for activation or equipment delivery. You will have to pay a monthly fee for monitoring, usually about $30. Ask if this fee will increase. You may also want several base units if you have a large home. Ask if you can get a discount for this.

Make sure the monitoring center is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for both emergency monitoring and customer service. You’ll want a UL-listed call center, which means the center meets strict requirements for backup systems in the event of system or power failures.

With regard to the system itself, look for one that’s easy to use, has free replacement service for equipment that’s not working, is waterproof so that it can be worn in the bathroom, and is portable if you travel. The alerting button works only within a certain distance of the base unit, so get one with a range of at least 400 feet. You may also want a routine check-in service from operators to make sure you’re in good health.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alerting system</th>
<th>Button range from base unit</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Monthly costs</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LifeFone</td>
<td>480 feet</td>
<td>Can arrange a routine check-in call with user; alert button enables you to answer house phone as a speaker phone; fall detection; 42-hour battery backup</td>
<td>$29.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifeline</td>
<td>800 feet</td>
<td>Fall detection; 30-hour battery backup; GPS and mobile unit coming soon</td>
<td>$29.95 basic service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Station</td>
<td>500 feet</td>
<td>Two trained operators answer every time you press the button, not just one; user is required to push a button to &quot;check in&quot; with provider each day; waterproof pendant or wrist button; portable base unit; 32-hour battery backup</td>
<td>$29.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Guardian</td>
<td>600 feet</td>
<td>GPS; portable base unit; can arrange a routine check-in call with user; 75-hour battery backup; free lock box; can use button to contact family members in non-emergency</td>
<td>$29.95 basic service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MobileHelp</td>
<td>400 to 600 feet depending on base unit</td>
<td>GPS; portable base unit; fall detection; 36-hour battery backup</td>
<td>$29.95 basic service</td>
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Wear the gadget at all times, even in the bathroom and outside.

An alerting device system is only effective if you use it. Many people take the devices off when they go into the bathroom. But the alerting device is waterproof, and designed to stay on whether one showers, sleeps, cooks, or walks outside.

How do you get that message across? Remind wearers and caregivers of the consequences if an accident occurs when the device is not worn and no one is available to help. A stroke or a heart attack requires treatment as soon as possible. Other events, such as a bad fall and immobility, can lead to dehydration, skin breakdown, missed medications, untreated blood pressure drops or elevations, and delirium.

Don’t think that a cellphone is as effective as the alerting device, either. Cellphones are not waterproof, and do not remain on one’s body when undressed. In addition, people with mild cognitive impairment may not be able to press the proper buttons on a cellphone to call for help.