



Harvard Health Letter

VOLUME 39 • NUMBER 2 | DECEMBER 2013

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 Moscovitz, a geriatric social worker at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital.



Medical alerting devices can be worn on the wrist like a watch, or around the neck, like a pendant. They can also be attached to wheelchairs.

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

continued on p. 7 ▶▶

INSIDE

- Ask the doctor 2
 - ▶ Why are trans fats so bad for you?
 - ▶ Best time of day to monitor BP?
- Name that headache 3
- Surprising caffeine sources . 3
- Get fit by couchersizing 4
- Move of the month 4
- Kicking the sleep aid habit . 5
- Sleep aids and driving risk. . 5
- Avoiding medication errors . 6
- Alerting device buying guide 7
- When to wear the device . . . 7
- News briefs 8
 - ▶ How long will you stay healthy?
 - ▶ Statins and the risk of cataracts.
 - ▶ Juice or whole fruit: which is best?



FIVE THINGS TO DO THIS MONTH

1 Hunt for hidden caffeine sources.

The stimulant is now added to snacks, energy bars, breakfast foods, and drinks. (page 3)

2 Identify headache symptoms.

Weakness is never typical of a headache and may indicate a stroke. (page 3)

3 Use commercial time to exercise. Stand up and sit down repeatedly during TV breaks to protect your ability to transfer from chairs and bathroom seats. (page 4)

4 Wean yourself off sleep medications. Gradually reduce the dose of a sleep drug each week, with a doctor’s supervision. (page 5)

5 Avoid medication mistakes. Use a chart or journal to track the time and dose of each pill you take. (page 6)

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. ♥

Medical alerting systems that come closest to the ideal

For all companies listed: No contracts are required; no fees are charged for equipment and delivery; broken equipment is replaced for free; service is provided 24/7/365; waterproof pendant or wrist button that's replaced for free when batteries are low; and monitoring centers are UL-approved.

Alerting system	Button range from base unit	Features	Monthly costs
LifeFone 877-814-9419 www.lifefone.com	480 feet	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	\$29.95
Lifeline 855-849-3373 www.lifelinesys.com	800 feet	Fall detection; 30-hour battery backup; GPS and mobile unit coming soon	\$29.95 basic service \$47.00 with auto fall detection
Life Station 866-725-8679 www.lifestation.com	500 feet	Two trained operators answer every time you press the button, not just one; user is required to push a button to "check in" with provider each day; waterproof pendant or wrist button; portable base unit; 32-hour battery backup	\$29.95
Medical Guardian 800-668-9200 www.medicalguardian.com	600 feet	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	\$29.95 basic service \$39.95 with GPS service
MobileHelp 800-800-1710 www.mobilehelpnow.com	400 to 600 feet depending on base unit	GPS; portable base unit; fall detection; 36-hour battery backup	\$29.95 basic service \$41.95 with GPS service

High-tech alerting device ... continued from p1

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. ♥

Warning: Once alerting devices go on, they should stay on

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. ♥