

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A MEDICAL ALERT SYSTEM

Last updated: July 2015 Sue Byrne

Medical alert systems were introduced in the 1970s as simple push-button devices worn around the neck. They summoned help by signaling a base station connected to a home phone line that would alert a call-center operator. Today's systems are still wearable, but you can also mount help buttons throughout the home that allow for two-way voice communication with call centers. Some offer motion-sensitive pendants that can detect a fall and place a call for help.

Who needs one? Most buyers purchase a system for an aging parent who lives alone so that they can get help quickly if needed. That person might be at a heightened risk for falls because of [poor eyesight](#) or [memory changes](#), says Barbara Resnick, Ph.D., professor of nursing at the University of Maryland and past president of the American Geriatrics Society. The systems can also be useful in nonemergency situations where the user doesn't need an ambulance but does need someone to come to their aid. The call center will alert a preselected relative or friend who can come over and assist.

What the best medical alert systems have?

The experts we consulted recommend looking for a medical alert system that meets all or most of these criteria.

- **It works for a user's specific disability.** For example, a stroke survivor may need a device he or she can activate with one hand.
- **It offers a choice of a wristband and/or neck pendant.** Cords worn around the neck can pose a strangulation risk; wristbands may irritate those with skin ailments.
- **It includes help buttons** that can be wall-mounted near the floor in multiple rooms in case the user falls and isn't wearing the pendant.
- **It offers multiple choices** for whom to contact if you need help, from emergency services to a friend or relative who lives nearby.
- **It has a battery backup** in case of a power failure.
- **The base station can be contacted** from anywhere on your property—even in your yard or at your mailbox.
- **The company has its own monitoring center**, in the U.S., and employs its own trained emergency operators (rather than contracting that function out).
- **The monitoring center has been certified by Underwriters Laboratories (UL)**, a nonprofit safety and consulting company.

Choose the right medical alert system

All systems (listed in alphabetical order, below) offer daily 24-hour monitoring services. All come with a waterproof neck pendant and wristband with a battery backup. Some offer a GPS mobile feature, which works when you are traveling away from home. Some also offer a mobile 911 phone, which places a call to local 911 services if you're out of your normal service range. It carries an additional fee. Some offer an automatic fall detection system, but they say it cannot detect 100 percent of falls, and the companies charge an extra fee for this service. Tip: As you shop, ask for quotes in writing because prices and services may change.

Medical Alert Systems Comparison

<p>Life Alert 800-494-9394</p> 	<p>Life Station 877-288-4962</p> 	<p>Medical Alert 800-800-2537</p> 	<p>Mobile Help 800-992-0616</p> 	<p>Philips Lifeline 855-214-1363</p> 	<p>Rescue Alert 800-688-9576</p> 
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Monthly service cost						
Landline/	\$50/	\$26/	\$30/	NA/	\$30/	\$29/
Cellular	\$60	\$33	\$35	\$35	\$42	\$43
GPS mobile ¹	\$70	\$30 (\$50 device fee)	\$40	\$38	\$55 (landline) \$65 (cell) (\$149 device fee)	\$45 (\$90 device fee)
Features						
Range (in feet)	300	500	600	350 to 600	600	600
Mobile 911 phone ²	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Automatic fall detection ³	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Estimated Fees						
Minimum obligation	36 months ⁴	30 days	90 days	None	None	None
Activation	\$95	None	None	None	\$0 to \$50	None
Cancellation fee	Remainder of contract	None	None	None	None	\$0 to \$25 ⁵
Monitoring services						
In-house or outsourced	In-house	In-house	Outsourced	Outsourced	In-house	In-house
UL-listed (or comparable)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes ⁶