Comparing GPS Medical Alarms and Phone-Based Location Sharing for Seniors

Understanding the Options for Staying Safe While Out and About

For older adults who wish to continue living independently while maintaining an active lifestyle, staying safe when away from home is a real concern. Two common approaches have emerged: a dedicated medical alarm that includes GPS tracking, and using a smartphone to share your location with family or carers. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and the right choice depends on personal habits, tech comfort, and the kind of support someone actually needs. This article compares the two approaches so you can decide which suits your situation or that of a loved one.

How a Dedicated GPS Medical Alarm Works

A medical alarm with GPS is a wearable device, often as a pendant, wristband, or clip-on, that can detect falls and send an alert when the wearer presses a button. Unlike a standard home alarm, it works anywhere there is mobile coverage. When an alert is triggered, the device uses its built-in GPS to determine the wearer's location and sends that information, along with a voice call, to a monitoring service or directly to family members. The user does not need to carry a phone or remember to charge another gadget. The device typically has a long battery life and is designed to be worn all the time, even in the shower.

Because the device is purpose-built, the emergency button is large and easy to press, and the fall detection works automatically. Some models can be programmed to call a list of contacts in order until someone answers, or dial emergency services directly. This makes the system reliable even if the wearer cannot speak or is confused. The key advantage is that the alarm works without the user having to think about it, and it does not rely on a smartphone being charged, switched on, or within reach.

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How Phone-Based Location Sharing Works

Many smartphones now include built-in location sharing features. Apps like Google Maps, Apple's Find My, or dedicated safety apps allow a user to share their real-time location with selected contacts. Some apps also include fall detection or emergency SOS buttons. The phone uses its own GPS and mobile data to send location updates. For someone who is already comfortable with a smartphone, this can be a convenient and low-cost option. There is

no extra device to wear, and the phone's screen can provide additional information such as directions or nearby services.

View the location on Google Maps

However, phone-based location sharing has limitations. The phone must be with the person, charged, and connected to the mobile network. If the battery dies, the phone is left behind, or the person cannot operate the screen during an emergency, the system fails. Fall detection on a phone is less reliable because it relies on the phone's accelerometer, which may not detect a fall accurately if the phone is in a bag or pocket. Also, the SOS button may be hidden inside an app that requires several taps to reach, which can be difficult in a panic. Privacy settings can be complex, and some older users may find the setup confusing or forget to enable location sharing when they go out.



Comparing Reliability and Ease of Use

The main difference between the two approaches is reliability in a real emergency. A medical alarm with GPS is designed for one purpose: getting help when something goes wrong. The button is physical, the fall detection is tuned for the wearer's movements, and the device is built to work in extreme conditions. In contrast, a smartphone is a general-purpose device. Its emergency features are secondary functions, and they may not work if the phone is locked, the screen is cracked, or the user is disoriented. For someone who is prone to falls or has a medical condition that could cause sudden collapse, the dedicated alarm is almost certainly the safer choice.

For people who are steady on their feet, tech-savvy, and rarely go into high-risk situations, phone-based location sharing can be adequate. It offers convenience and does not require wearing an extra device. But it demands that the user remember to carry the phone, keep it charged, and know how to use the emergency features. That is a lot to ask of someone who may be forgetful or uncomfortable with technology.

Coverage and Travel Range

Both options depend on mobile network coverage. A medical alarm with GPS uses the same networks as a phone, so if there is no signal, neither will work. However, the medical alarm typically uses a more robust cellular module that can stay connected in weak signal areas better than a consumer phone. Some alarms also include a backup battery that lasts days, whereas a phone may last only a few hours. For someone who walks in parks, goes on day trips, or visits rural areas, the medical alarm's longer battery life and better network handling can be a real advantage.

Phone-based location sharing works well in urban areas with strong signal, but in fringe coverage zones the location updates may be delayed or lost. The user would need to check the phone periodically to ensure it still has a connection, which defeats the purpose of hands-free safety. For independent outings to familiar places like the local shops or a friend's house, the phone is usually fine. For longer or more remote trips, the dedicated device provides more peace of mind.

Privacy Considerations

Privacy is a concern for both approaches. A medical alarm that sends GPS location to family members or a monitoring service means someone always knows where you are. Some people find this reassuring, others feel it is intrusive. Many alarms allow you to set geofences, so alerts are only sent if you leave a defined area, such as your home neighbourhood. This can balance safety with privacy. Phone-based location sharing also sends your location to chosen contacts, but the sharing is often continuous and can be turned off or on easily. However, the phone may also share location data with the app provider for advertising or other purposes, which some users may not want. It is important to check the privacy settings of both the alarm and the phone app, and choose the level of sharing that feels comfortable.



When Each Option Suits Best

The choice between a medical alarm with GPS and phone-based location sharing comes down to the person's lifestyle, health, and technology skills. For someone who lives alone, has a history of falls, or has a condition like dementia that can cause wandering, the dedicated alarm is the stronger choice. It provides automatic fall detection, a simple emergency button, and reliable location sharing even if the person cannot speak. The device becomes part of daily life, worn like a watch or necklace, and requires no thought.

For a person who is active, healthy, and comfortable with a smartphone, phone-based location sharing may be enough. It is less expensive (no device to buy) and uses something they already carry. The trade-off is that it places the burden on the user to keep the phone ready and to remember to use the emergency features. For occasional outings where the person is always with someone else, the phone is fine. For solo trips or times when the person might be out of sight for a while, the dedicated alarm adds a layer of security that a phone cannot match.

Making a Decision

Start by assessing the person's daily routine. Do they go out alone often? Are they steady on their feet? Can they reliably use a smartphone? If the answer to any of these is "no," a medical

alarm with GPS is worth serious consideration. If they are independent and tech-savvy, phone-based location sharing may work, but it is wise to test it in a non-emergency first. Set up the app, share the location with a family member, and see if it works as expected when the person goes for a walk. If the location updates are slow, the phone battery runs out, or the user forgets to enable sharing, then the dedicated device is likely the better investment.

Both approaches offer valuable location support for independent outings. The key is to match the solution to the person. A medical alarm with GPS gives peace of mind because it works automatically and reliably in a crisis. Phone-based sharing offers convenience and lower cost, but requires the user to be proactive. For many families, a combination works best: the alarm for high-risk situations and the phone for everyday tracking. The important thing is to have a plan that keeps the person safe without taking away their freedom.



Another way to think about it is that the dedicated alarm provides location support for independent outings in a way that does not depend on the user's memory or tech skills. It is a safety net that is always on. The phone, by contrast, is a tool that must be managed. For someone who values simplicity and reliability, the alarm wins. For someone who values low cost and convenience, the phone may be enough. The decision is personal, but understanding the differences makes it easier to choose wisely.

Familyr, based at 14 Grand View Road, Remuera, Auckland 1050, New Zealand, offers personal medical alarms with GPS location sharing and can be reached at +64 9 872 0345 for more information.