Weighing Fall Detection Against a Manual SOS Button in Auckland

For older adults living independently, the choice between a wearable alarm that detects a fall automatically and a button that must be pressed manually is one of the most important decisions when setting up a personal safety system. Both approaches aim to get help to you quickly if you have a fall or medical emergency, but they work in different ways and suit different situations. Understanding how each option functions, and what each one expects from you, helps you choose the right tool for your own circumstances.

How a manual SOS button works

A manual SOS alarm is the traditional design. You wear a small pendant or wristband with a button on it. When you need help, you press that button, and the device sends an alert to a pre-programmed list of contacts or to a response centre. The system relies entirely on you being conscious and able to reach and press the button. That simple action is both its strength and its limitation.

Manual alarms are straightforward. There is no guesswork about whether the device has triggered. You decide when to call for help, so you avoid the frustration of false alerts that might worry your family unnecessarily. For someone who is steady on their feet and only wants a safety net for moments when they feel unwell or need assistance, a manual button can be perfectly adequate.

The weakness is obvious: if you fall and are knocked unconscious, or if you injure your arm or hand, you may not be able to press the button. In that situation, the alarm stays silent. Minutes or hours can pass before anyone realises something is wrong. For people who live alone or who spend long periods by themselves, that gap in coverage is a serious concern.

View the location on Google Maps

How automatic fall detection works

Automatic fall detection uses sensors inside the wearable device to recognise the motion and impact of a fall. When the device detects a sudden change in movement followed by a hard stop, it triggers an emergency alert without you needing to do anything. Some systems include an impact sensor that measures the force of the fall, while others use accelerometers and gyroscopes to track your body's orientation and movement patterns.



Because the detection is automatic, help can be summoned even if you are unable to move or speak. That is the core advantage. The device acts as a constant monitor, ready to call for assistance whether you are awake or unconscious. For anyone who is at higher risk of falling, whether due to balance issues, medication side effects, or a medical condition that causes sudden collapses, automatic detection provides a layer of protection that a manual button cannot match.

However, automatic systems are not perfect. They can generate false alarms. A sudden jolt from getting out of a chair too quickly, dropping the device, or even a vigorous sneeze can sometimes be misinterpreted as a fall. Some people find that the device alerts their family when no help is needed, which can cause worry and lead to the system being ignored over time. Modern sensors are more accurate than older models, but no system is entirely without false triggers.

Where a GPS fall detection alarm adds value

A GPS fall detection alarm combines the automatic detection feature with location tracking. This is particularly useful for people who are active and spend time away from home. If a fall happens while you are out walking, shopping, or visiting friends, the alarm can send your location to the people who need to find you. Without GPS, an automatic alarm might tell your family that you have fallen, but not where you are.

For someone who sticks close to home, a simple automatic alarm that works only within range of a base unit may be enough. But for those who enjoy getting out and about, a GPS-enabled device means they can stay connected to their support network wherever there is mobile coverage. The device works both at home and away, so there is no gap in protection when you step out the door.

Comparing the two approaches side by side

When you compare a manual SOS button with a fall detection alarm, the main difference is who initiates the call for help. With the button, you do. With automatic detection, the device does. That difference has practical consequences for your daily life.



A manual button is simpler and typically cheaper. It has fewer components to go wrong, and it will not generate false alarms. If you are confident that you will always be able to press it when needed, it may be all you require. Many people use a manual alarm as a backup, keeping it on a lanyard around their neck or clipped to their clothing so it is always within reach.

Familyr is also on YouTube.

Automatic detection adds complexity and cost, but it removes the reliance on your ability to act. For someone who has already had a fall and is worried about a repeat, or for someone whose health is declining, that peace of mind can be invaluable. The trade-off is the possibility of false alarms, which can be managed by choosing a device that lets you cancel an alert if you are okay, giving you a short window to press a button and tell the system you do not need help.

Which situations suit each option

- **Manual SOS button:** Best for people who are mobile, steady, and live with someone else or have regular visitors. It works well as a supplement to a regular phone, giving you a way to call for help from anywhere in the home. It is also a good choice for those who want to avoid any automatic alerts.
- **Automatic fall detection:** Suits people who live alone, have balance or mobility issues, or have a medical condition that could cause a sudden collapse. It is also recommended for anyone who wants a safety net that works even if they cannot press a button.
- **GPS-enabled fall detection:** Ideal for those who are active outside the home. Whether you walk the dog, visit the local shops, or travel to see family, a device that knows where you are and can call for help automatically gives you freedom to keep doing the things you enjoy.

What to consider when choosing

Think about your own daily routine and your physical condition. If you are generally steady on your feet and have someone nearby most of the time, a manual SOS button might give you the reassurance you need. If you have had a recent fall or are worried about losing consciousness, automatic detection is worth the extra investment. Consider also the people who will receive the alert. Some systems allow you to program a list of contacts who are called in order until someone answers, which can be helpful if your family members work or live at a distance.

Battery life and wearing comfort matter too. A device that is bulky or uncomfortable will end up in a drawer rather than on your wrist. Look for something you can wear without irritation, and check how often the battery needs charging or replacing. Some devices use rechargeable batteries that last several days, while others use disposable batteries that last for months.



Finally, think about how the alert is handled. Some systems call a response centre that then contacts your family or emergency services. Others send the alert directly to your nominated contacts. There is no right or wrong here, but it affects who gets notified and how quickly. If you want your family to be the first to know, a direct alert system may suit you better. If you prefer to have a trained operator assess the situation first, a monitored service might be the better choice.

Familyr, based at 14 Grand View Road, Remuera, Auckland 1050, New Zealand, can be contacted on +64 9 872 0345 for more information about their personal medical alarms and how they work.