What to check before buying a wearable personal alarm in New Zealand

Wearable personal alarms have moved well beyond the pendant that only works at home. Modern devices combine GPS location sharing, fall detection and two-way voice calling, which means choosing the right one for your family involves more than picking a colour. The following points cover what matters most when you are comparing options for a relative or for yourself.

How the alarm connects

Not all personal alarms work the same way when you press the button. Some connect through a home base station and only function within a limited range. Others use mobile networks and can operate anywhere there is cellular coverage. If the person who will wear the device goes out for walks, visits friends or lives alone, a device that relies on a home base unit may not give you the reassurance you expect. Look for a unit that uses the mobile network directly so that the SOS button works whether the wearer is in the garden, at the shops or on a bus.

Check which network the device uses and whether it works in the areas where the wearer spends time. New Zealand has good mobile coverage across most of the country, but there are rural pockets where signal can be weak. A device that supports multiple network bands or can fall back to a different carrier gives more peace of mind.

GPS location sharing

Location sharing is one of the most useful features of a modern personal alarm. When an alert is triggered, the device sends the wearer's position to a monitoring centre or directly to your phone. This saves precious time if the wearer cannot speak or does not know where they are. Make sure the device updates the location frequently enough. Some units only send a GPS fix at the moment the button is pressed, while others provide a live tracking link that you can follow from your own phone. For someone who may wander due to dementia or who gets disoriented easily, live tracking can be a major advantage.

Also check whether the device shares location indoors. GPS signals can be weak inside concrete buildings or shopping centres. Some devices supplement GPS with Wi-Fi or Bluetooth positioning to give a more reliable indoor fix.



Fall detection and how it works

Fall detection is a feature that many families look for, but it is worth understanding its limits. No fall detection system catches every fall. Most devices use an accelerometer to detect a

sudden impact and a change in angle. They work well for hard, forward falls but may not always detect a slow, controlled collapse or a fall onto a soft surface. Some devices let you adjust the sensitivity, which can help reduce false alarms from bending over or from a bumpy car ride.

If the wearer lives alone, fall detection can be the difference between getting help quickly and lying on the floor for hours. However, it is not a substitute for pressing the button. Teach the wearer to press the SOS button whenever they can, and treat the automatic detection as a backup.

Two-way voice communication

Two-way voice means the monitoring team or a family member can talk directly to the wearer through the device. This is important because it lets you assess the situation before deciding what to do. If the wearer presses the button by accident, they can say so and avoid an unnecessary trip by emergency services. If they have fallen and cannot get up, the responder can keep them calm while help arrives.

Check the speaker and microphone quality. The device should have a speaker loud enough for someone with hearing loss and a microphone that picks up a voice clearly even if the wearer is lying down. Some units include an automatic answering feature that connects a voice call as soon as the alarm is triggered, so the wearer does not need to fumble with buttons.

Battery life and charging

A personal alarm is useless if the battery is dead. Most wearable devices use a rechargeable battery that needs charging every few days or once a week, depending on usage and GPS polling frequency. Check how long the battery lasts under normal use and how long the device can stay on standby. Some units also have a low-battery alert that sends a notification to your phone or to a monitoring centre. This is a useful feature because it reminds you to charge the device before it goes flat.

Also consider how the device charges. Does it use a proprietary charging cradle, a standard USB cable, or a wireless charging pad? If the wearer lives in a different city, you may want a charging method that is easy for them to manage without your help.

Water resistance and wearing options

A personal alarm is worn all day, every day. It needs to survive hand washing, showering and the occasional rain shower. Look for a water resistance rating of at least IP67, which means the device can be submerged in water for a short time. Some units are water-resistant but not

waterproof, so check the fine print. If the wearer wants to wear it in the shower, make sure the device is rated for that.


SOS

Wearing options also matter. Most people prefer a pendant around the neck or a clip on a belt or pocket. Some devices come as a wristband that looks like a smartwatch, which can be less conspicuous and harder to forget. Ask yourself what the wearer will actually use. A pendant that ends up in a drawer because it feels uncomfortable is no help at all.

Monitoring fees and setup support

Most personal alarms require a monthly or annual monitoring fee. This fee covers the monitoring centre that answers SOS calls, the mobile data for GPS and voice, and the upkeep of the system. The fees vary, so compare what is included in the price. Some services also include setup support, where they help you activate the device, test the GPS and register emergency contacts. This can be very helpful if you are not comfortable with technology or if the wearer lives far away.

Setup support may also include programming emergency contacts into the device and showing you how to send SMS commands to check the device status. A service that offers a simple online portal or a mobile app for managing these settings can save a lot of time.

Emergency contact system

Think about who will be contacted when the alarm is triggered. Some services call a list of emergency contacts in order until someone answers. Others forward the alert to a monitoring centre that can dispatch emergency services directly. Both approaches have merits, but you need to know which one suits your family. If the wearer lives alone and you live far away, a monitoring centre that can send an ambulance immediately may be better than a system that calls you first.

Also check whether the device supports multiple emergency contacts and whether those contacts receive notifications through a phone call, text message or app alert. A system that allows you to update contacts easily is useful, because phone numbers and relationships change over time.

Putting it all together

Choosing a personal alarm for a family member is a practical decision that depends on the wearer's lifestyle, health and living situation. Start by thinking about where the device will be used most. If the wearer is active and goes out alone, GPS location sharing and mobile network connectivity are non-negotiable. If they have poor balance or a history of falls, make fall detection a priority. If they have hearing difficulties, two-way voice with a loud speaker matters. And for anyone who might forget to charge a device, a long battery life with a low-battery alert is key.



Take advantage of any trial period or return policy. Let the wearer test the device for a week or two to see if it is comfortable, easy to use and reliable in the places they go. A device that feels good and works well in real life will actually be worn, which is the whole point.

If you are looking for a starting point, a service like familyr.co.nz focuses on wearable personal safety devices designed for independent living in New Zealand. Their approach combines SOS alerts, fall detection, GPS location sharing and two-way voice in a single mobile unit, which

covers the main features most families need. That said, the best device for your family depends on your specific circumstances, so use the checklist above to compare options and ask the right questions before buying.

Look at the device's water resistance, battery life and wearing options. Check how the fall detection works and whether the monitoring fees include everything you expect. Make sure the emergency contact system matches your family's situation. And always consider the person who will wear it. A device that fits their daily routine and feels natural to use is one that will actually be there when they need it. The right alarm gives both the wearer and the family more confidence to live independently, and that is what makes the effort of choosing one worthwhile.