What to do when an older person doesn't answer their medical alarm

When an older person does not answer their phone or their medical alarm, it raises an urgent question: are they safe or do they need help right now? A quick, calm response can make all the difference, especially for someone who lives alone or has health concerns. The direct answer is to follow a simple plan: try to reach them by an alternate method, check for any signs of a fall or distress, contact a nearby neighbour or family member who can physically check on them, and if you still cannot confirm they are safe, call emergency services. A GPS medical alarm can speed up this process by giving you real-time location information and a way to talk to the person directly, even when they cannot pick up a phone.

This article explains what steps carers and whānau should take when a call or alarm goes unanswered, and how modern medical alarms with GPS and two-way voice communication help bridge the gap between concern and certainty.

Start with the simplest check

Before assuming the worst, try the obvious. Call the person again from a different number or use a different device. Sometimes a phone is on silent, or the ringer is turned down. If the person has a landline and a mobile, try both. Wait a full minute between attempts; older adults may move slowly to reach the phone. If you are using a medical alarm system that supports two-way voice communication, speak through the alarm base unit or pendant. Often the person can hear you even if they cannot get to the phone quickly.

If you still get no reply, move to the next step: check for signs of a fall or medical event. Many medical alarms, including wearable ones with automatic fall detection, can send an alert when a fall is detected. If you receive such an alert and the person does not respond to your voice call through the alarm, treat it as a genuine emergency. Do not assume they are simply ignoring you.

Use location sharing and GPS to see where they are

A key advantage of a GPS medical alarm is that it shows the wearer's location in real time. If the older person is at home but not answering, you know where to send help. If they are out for a walk or a drive and do not respond, the GPS data can guide you or emergency responders directly to them. This is especially valuable for someone with dementia or memory issues, who may wander and become disoriented.



Check the location information on the alarm system's app or web portal. If the person is at a familiar place like their home or a regular cafe, you might ask a neighbour or friend nearby to go and check. If the location is unfamiliar or outdoors, treat it with more urgency. The combination of GPS location and an SOS alert gives you a clear picture of what is happening and where.

Activate your response plan

Every carer should have a simple response plan written down and shared with family members, neighbours, and the older person themselves. The plan should include:

- Primary and backup contacts to call when the person does not answer

- A list of neighbours or local whānau who can physically check the home
- The older person's medical conditions and any medications they take
- The emergency contact number for local ambulance or fire services
- The login details or app access for any medical alarm system, including GPS location sharing features

When you cannot reach the person by phone or through the alarm's two-way voice feature, move through the plan step by step. First, call a neighbour or a nearby family member and ask them to go to the home. If they can get inside, ask them to check if the person is conscious and breathing. If the door is locked and no one answers, they should call emergency services. Do not delay calling for help if you suspect a fall or medical emergency.

An SMS alert can be part of your plan too. Some medical alarm systems send an automatic SMS to a list of contacts when an alarm is triggered. This can speed up the chain of communication. If you receive an SMS alert and the person does not answer your follow-up call, treat it as a high-priority situation.

When to call emergency services

Trust your gut. If you have tried multiple ways to reach the person, checked their GPS location, asked a neighbour to look in, and still have no confirmation they are safe, call for help immediately. Paramedics and police are trained for exactly this scenario. They can force entry to a home if necessary and provide medical aid. It is far better to call too early than too late.

Tell the dispatcher that the person is an older adult, that they have a medical alarm, and that you have their last known location from the GPS system. This information helps responders find them faster. If the person has a history of falls, heart conditions, or other serious health issues, mention that as well.



Do not worry about being wrong. Most emergency services would rather respond to a false alarm than miss a real emergency. Carers often hesitate because they do not want to bother anyone or feel embarrassed if the person is fine. But the cost of waiting can be serious. A fall that leaves an older person unable to move or call for help can become life-threatening within hours.

How a GPS medical alarm supports carers

A modern medical alarm does more than just let a person call for help. It gives carers a window into their loved one's safety when they cannot be there in person. The ability to see a person's location, speak to them through the device, and receive automatic alerts for falls or SOS button presses changes the way families manage care. For example, a wearable pendant with GPS means the person can go about their daily life - walking the dog, visiting friends, shopping - and still be reachable if something goes wrong.

The two-way voice communication feature is especially useful in the scenario where someone does not answer. You can speak directly through the alarm base unit or pendant and ask if they are okay. If they do not reply, you know something is wrong. This feature removes the guesswork and lets you move quickly to the next step in your plan. It also gives the older person reassurance that someone is listening and ready to help.

Some systems, including those offered by familyr.co.nz, combine GPS location, automatic fall detection, SOS alerts, and two-way voice communication in one wearable device with no monthly fees. This makes the technology accessible for families who want long-term peace of mind without ongoing costs. The device works anywhere there is cellular coverage, so it supports an active lifestyle. When an alert comes in, you can respond with confidence because you know exactly where the person is and can talk to them directly.

Practical steps to prepare today

You do not have to wait for an emergency to get organised. Take these actions now to make sure you can respond effectively when someone does not answer their alarm or phone.

1. Write down the response plan and share it with everyone in the care circle, including neighbours. Include phone numbers, medical details, and access instructions for the home.
2. Test the medical alarm regularly. Make sure the older person knows how to use the SOS button and that the two-way voice feature works. Check that the GPS location updates correctly on the app.
3. Set up SMS alerts so that multiple family members receive a notification when an alarm is triggered. This spreads the responsibility and ensures someone will see it even if you are busy.
4. Talk to neighbours and let them know the older person lives alone or has health concerns. Ask if they would be willing to check on them if asked. Give neighbours a way to contact you directly.
5. Review the alarm system's battery life and charging routine. A dead battery means no alerts. Set a reminder to charge the device or change its batteries weekly.

Staying calm and acting fast

The minutes after an unanswered call or alarm can feel stressful, but a clear head and a simple plan turn panic into action. Start with the easiest checks: call again, use the two-way voice feature on the alarm, and look at the GPS location. If those do not work, escalate quickly. Ask a neighbour to knock on the door. Call emergency services if you cannot confirm safety. The whole process should take no more than five to ten minutes.



Carers often worry about overreacting. But in the case of an older person who may have fallen or become unwell, speed is everything. A GPS medical alarm gives you the tools to act fast and with good information. Use them. The peace of mind that comes from knowing you did everything you could is worth far more than the awkwardness of a false alarm.

For more information on how a wearable medical alarm with GPS and fall detection works, visit familyr.co.nz. The site provides details on the device, its features, and how it supports older New Zealanders and their families.