Comparing family monitored alarms with 24 hour call centres for older adults

How family monitored alarms differ from 24 hour call centres

When choosing an SOS alarm for elderly family members, one of the biggest decisions is how alerts are handled once the button is pressed. The two main approaches are family monitored systems and professional 24 hour call centres. Both have their own strengths, and the right choice depends on the older person's lifestyle, health needs, and the support network available. Understanding how each model works can help you make an informed decision without overcomplicating things.

Family monitored alarms put the response chain directly into the hands of people the user already knows and trusts. Typically, when the SOS button is pressed on a wearable device, the system sends an alert to a pre-set list of emergency contacts. Those contacts, often adult children, neighbours, or close friends, then receive a notification on their phone, usually via SMS or a mobile app. They can see the user's location if the device has GPS, and they can listen in or speak through the device's two way communication feature to assess the situation. From there, the family member decides what to do: call the user back, arrange help, or escalate to emergency services if needed.

The appeal of family monitoring is that the responder already knows the older person. They can tell from the tone of voice whether this is a genuine emergency or just a moment of confusion. They know the person's medical history, their usual routines, and how to calm them down. This personal touch can be comforting for an older adult who might feel anxious speaking to a stranger during a stressful moment. It also means that non-urgent alerts, like a false alarm or a minor stumble, can be handled without tying up emergency dispatchers. For families who live nearby or have a strong local support network, this model can work very smoothly.

But family monitoring also places responsibility on the family. Someone must be willing and able to answer alerts at any time, day or night. If the designated contacts work shifts, travel frequently, or have their own health issues, the response can be delayed. There is also the emotional toll: every alert, even a false one, can spike anxiety for the family member on the receiving end. Over time, this can lead to "alert fatigue" where genuine emergencies might be taken less seriously. For families spread across different time zones or with limited availability, the gaps in coverage can become a real concern.



Professional 24 hour call centres take a different approach. When the SOS button is pressed, the alert goes to a trained operator who is employed by the alarm provider. The operator has a protocol to follow. They try to establish two way communication with the user through the device's speaker and microphone. If the user cannot respond or sounds distressed, the operator follows a contact sequence: they call the emergency contacts listed on the user's file, and if no one answers or the situation is clearly urgent, they dispatch an ambulance or fire service. Some centres also maintain a caregiver plan with details about the user's medical conditions, medications, and preferred hospital, so responders have context when they arrive.

The main advantage of a call centre is reliability. The operator is always available, trained to stay calm, and accustomed to handling emergencies. They are not distracted by work, sleep, or family obligations. For older adults who live alone, have no nearby family, or have cognitive issues like dementia, this professional layer can be a lifesaver. The operator knows exactly what questions to ask and how to keep the user calm until help arrives. They also have the authority to call emergency services quickly, which a family member might hesitate to do.

However, call centres are not without drawbacks. The operator is a stranger, and some older adults find that intimidating. There can also be language barriers or hearing difficulties that make two way communication harder. The cost is another factor: professional monitoring usually involves a monthly subscription fee, whereas family monitoring often has no recurring charge beyond the device's purchase. Some families also worry about privacy, as the call

centre stores personal and medical information on file. While reputable providers have strict data handling policies, it is still a consideration for some.

So when does each model suit best? For an older person who is relatively independent, has at least one family member living within a short drive, and whose family can commit to being available, a family monitored alarm can be a practical and cost-effective choice. It keeps the support circle small and personal. On the other hand, if the older adult lives alone, has no reliable local contacts, or has a condition that might leave them unable to communicate, the professional call centre offers a safety net that family alone cannot provide. Some people choose a hybrid approach: they use a family monitored system but also enrol the user in a fall detection service or have a backup arrangement with a neighbour who can step in if the family is unavailable.

Another factor to weigh is the type of device and its features. Some SOS alarms for elderly users come with built-in fall detection, which automatically triggers an alert if a fall is detected even if the user does not press the button. In a family monitored setup, that alert still goes to the same contacts; in a call centre model, the operator handles it. Fall detection can be particularly important for older adults who are prone to falls or who might be unconscious after a fall and unable to call for help. The response protocol for automatic fall alerts should be clearly understood by whoever is receiving them, whether that is family or a professional.



Two way communication is another feature that changes the dynamic. With a device that has a speaker and microphone, the responder can talk to the older person directly. In a family monitored scenario, this allows the family member to assess the situation in real time. They might ask "Are you okay?" or "Do you need me to come over?" and get an immediate answer. In a call centre, the operator can do the same, but the conversation is more clinical. For someone who is hard of hearing, the operator might need to speak loudly and clearly, which the device's speaker can handle if the quality is good. It is worth testing the audio quality before committing to a system.

GPS location tracking is increasingly common in wearable alarms. This is useful whether the monitoring is done by family or a call centre. If the older person goes for a walk and gets lost or falls in an unfamiliar place, the GPS coordinates can guide the responder to them. In a

family monitored system, the family member sees the location on their phone. In a call centre model, the operator can share the location with emergency dispatchers. For someone who wanders due to dementia, GPS can be a critical feature that family monitoring handles well, as long as the family member is able to interpret the map and act on it quickly.

One practical consideration is the contact sequence. In a family monitored system, the family defines the order of contacts: for example, first call the eldest child, then the neighbour, then the other child. If the first contact does not answer, the system tries the next. Some family monitored services allow the user to set up a caregiver plan that includes medical details and instructions, similar to what a call centre would have. But the execution still depends on the family member's availability. If they miss the alert because their phone is on silent, the whole chain is delayed. Professional call centres have redundant staffing and failover procedures, so an alert is never ignored.

For families who want the best of both worlds, some providers offer a hybrid model where the alert is first sent to the family, and if no one responds within a set time, it escalates to a professional call centre. This gives the family the chance to handle it personally while ensuring that if they are unavailable, the user is not left stranded. Not all providers offer this, but it is worth asking about. Another option is to use a family monitored system but also subscribe to a separate emergency response service that can be called if needed, though that adds complexity.

Ultimately, the decision comes down to the older person's specific circumstances and the family's capacity. An SOS alarm for elderly loved ones should be chosen based on who will reliably answer the call, not just on features or price. It can be helpful to talk to the older person about their preferences. Some feel safer knowing a family member will respond; others prefer the anonymity of a professional operator. There is no one-size-fits-all answer, and the best system is the one that will actually be worn and used consistently.



For those considering a family monitored approach, services like familyr.co.nz offer a wearable medical alarm that sends SOS alerts, GPS location, and fall detection directly to a family network via an app, without ongoing monthly fees. This model works well when the family is engaged and available. The other use of the phrase familyr.co.nz is in the context of comparing options: if you are evaluating different systems, it is worth looking at how the alert is delivered to the responder and what information they receive. A clear, fast notification with location and audio can make all the difference in an urgent situation.

Whichever path you choose, the goal is the same: to keep the older adult safe and independent for as long as possible. Understanding the trade-offs between family monitoring and professional call centres helps you pick the system that fits your family's rhythm and the older person's needs. Take the time to test the device, review the response protocol, and make sure everyone involved knows their role. That preparation is what turns a good SOS alarm into a reliable safety net.