How GPS in a Mobile Safety Alarm Can Support an Older Person's Independence

When is GPS location useful for an older person’s safety?

GPS location is most useful in a mobile safety alarm when an older person is away from home and needs help but cannot explain where they are. That happens during a fall, a sudden medical episode, or when someone becomes confused and wanders. In those moments, the ability for emergency services or family to find the person quickly can make a critical difference. For many older New Zealanders who live independently or enjoy daily walks and outings, a mobile alarm that includes GPS provides a layer of security that a traditional home alarm cannot offer.

What a mobile safety alarm with GPS does

At its simplest, a mobile safety alarm is a wearable device that lets the user call for help at the press of a button. When GPS is built in, the alarm can send the person’s location along with the alert. This is different from a fixed home alarm, which only works within range of its base unit. A mobile alarm with GPS works wherever there is a mobile network, so it travels with the person.

For an older person who still drives, walks the dog, or visits friends and family, this portability is what makes the device useful. If they fall in the garden, on a walking route, or in a public place, the alarm can still send their location. The same applies if they become lost while out alone. The GPS data tells responders exactly where to go, even if the person cannot speak or is disoriented.

Scenarios where GPS location becomes vital

Falls outside the home

Falls are a common risk for older people, and they often happen in places other than the living room or bathroom. A slip on a footpath, a stumble on uneven ground in a park, or a fall getting out of a car can leave someone injured and unable to get up. If they are alone and cannot call out, a mobile alarm with GPS can send an SOS alert with their precise location. This removes the need for the person to explain where they are, which may be impossible if they are in pain, shocked, or unable to speak clearly.



Wandering and confusion

Some older adults, especially those with early-stage dementia or memory issues, may wander away from home and become lost. This can be deeply worrying for family members. A mobile safety alarm with GPS lets a trusted family member or a monitoring service see the wearer's location in near-real time. If the person does not return at the expected time, the carer can check the location and go directly to them, or alert emergency services. This feature is often called geolocation, and it can give families peace of mind without restricting the older person's freedom.

Medical emergencies in unfamiliar places

A sudden medical event, chest pain, dizziness, a diabetic episode, can happen anywhere. If an older person is at a shopping centre, a community event, or on public transport, they may not be able to direct help. With a mobile alarm that has GPS, the alert carries their location, so 111 emergency services can be dispatched to the right spot without delay. The two-way voice feature on some alarms also allows the responder to talk to the person and assess the situation while help is on the way.

How GPS in an alarm differs from a smartphone

Many people carry a smartphone, but a phone is not a dedicated safety device. An older person may forget their phone, leave it at home, or find it too complicated to operate in an emergency. A mobile safety alarm is designed to be worn, as a pendant or on a wristband, so it is always on the person. It usually has a single button for SOS, which is simpler to press than unlocking a phone and opening an app. The battery is built to last, and the device does not rely on the user remembering to charge it every night.

Another difference is that a phone's location services can be turned off or may not work indoors, while a purpose-built alarm maintains a constant connection to the mobile network. Many alarms also include fall detection, which can automatically trigger an alert if a fall is detected, even if the person cannot press the button. This combination of GPS, fall detection, and two-way voice makes a mobile safety alarm a more reliable tool for older people who are active outside the home.

What to consider when choosing a mobile alarm with GPS

Not all alarms are the same, and the usefulness of GPS depends on how the device is designed. Here are a few practical things to think about:



- **Coverage area.** Check that the alarm works on the mobile network used in your area, especially in rural or remote parts of New Zealand. Some devices use 4G or 5G, while others rely on older networks that may be phased out.
- **Battery life and charging.** A device that needs daily charging is less convenient. Look for a battery that lasts several days or more, and consider how it is recharged, does

the user need to dock it, or does it use a simple cable?

- **Fall detection accuracy.** Not all fall detection is equally reliable. Some alarms use advanced sensors to reduce false alarms, which matters because false alerts can make a device annoying and cause carers to ignore real ones.
- **Two-way voice.** Being able to speak to a responder through the alarm can help in an emergency. It allows the user to explain what happened and lets the responder reassure them while waiting for help.
- **Family monitoring.** Some alarms let family members check the user's location through a smartphone app. This can be useful for carers who want to know their loved one has arrived home safely after an outing.

Balancing safety with independence

The real value of GPS in a mobile safety alarm is that it allows older people to keep doing the things they enjoy without constant worry. A person who loves gardening, taking long walks, or visiting friends can continue those activities knowing that help is always a button press away. For family members, the knowledge that they can be alerted and can see the person's location reduces anxiety. It is a practical tool for supporting independence, not for surveillance.

For example, an older person might decide to take a new walking route through a local reserve. If they trip and cannot get up, the alarm sends their location to their family or a monitoring centre. The family can then go to the exact spot or call 111 with the coordinates. Without GPS, the person might lie alone for hours before being found. The difference that location data makes in such a situation is hard to overstate.

How the device works with emergency services

When an SOS alert is sent, the GPS coordinates are included in the message. Some alarms connect directly to a 24/7 monitoring centre that can talk to the person through two-way voice and then contact 111 emergency services if needed. Others send the alert directly to the user's nominated family members or carers. In both cases, the location is transmitted, so responders know where to go. This is particularly important in New Zealand, where many suburbs and rural areas have long driveways, unmarked roads, or houses that are hard to find. A GPS pin can guide an ambulance directly to the person, saving valuable minutes.

Practical limits of GPS in an alarm

GPS is not perfect. It works best outdoors, where the device can see the sky. Inside buildings, especially multi-storey ones, the signal may be weaker or less accurate. Some alarms combine GPS with Wi-Fi or mobile network triangulation to improve indoor location, but this is not

always reliable. Users and families should understand that GPS gives an approximate location, not a room number. For indoor falls, a home base unit with a longer range may be a better option. That is why many safety alarms are designed as hybrid systems, a base unit for the home and a mobile pendant for when the person goes out.



Another consideration is that GPS adds cost and complexity to the device. Some alarms require a monthly subscription for the mobile network access and monitoring service. Others, like those offered by familyr.co.nz, provide the device with no ongoing fees after the initial purchase. It is worth comparing the total cost over a few years when choosing a system.

Final thoughts

GPS location is not needed every day, but when it is needed, it can be lifesaving. For an older person who values their freedom and still gets out of the house regularly, a mobile safety alarm with GPS is a sensible addition to their safety plan. It does not replace a home alarm, but it fills a gap that a home alarm cannot cover. By choosing a device that works well in New Zealand's mobile network environment and that offers reliable fall detection and two-way voice, families can help their older loved ones stay safe while staying active. For those interested in exploring this type of alarm, familyr.co.nz provides a wearable medical alarm designed specifically for older New Zealanders, with GPS, SOS alerts, fall detection, two-way calling, and family monitoring, all without monthly fees.