Key Features to Look for in a GPS Tracker for Elderly Family Members

When choosing a safety tracker for an older relative, you want features that work in real life, not just on paper. The most important ones are accurate location, reliable fall detection, an easy SOS alert, and the ability to talk back and forth. And because this is a device someone will carry every day, battery life and wearing options matter just as much. Below we break down each feature so you know what to look for and what questions to ask before buying.

Location accuracy: GPS alone is not enough

A tracker that relies only on GPS can struggle indoors or in dense city streets. GPS signals are weak inside concrete buildings, and they can bounce off tall structures, giving a position that is off by several metres. For a person who spends most of their time at home or in a care facility, that inaccuracy can be frustrating. If your loved one wanders into a nearby park, you need to know exactly where they are, not a block away.

Look for a device that combines GPS with Wi-Fi positioning. Wi-Fi triangulation works well inside buildings where GPS falters. Some modern trackers switch between GPS and Wi-Fi automatically, so you get a consistent fix whether the person is at the supermarket or in the garden. The best systems blend both signals and even use cell tower data to refine the location. This hybrid approach is far more reliable than GPS alone, especially in New Zealand suburbs where homes often have thick walls and metal roofing.

Fall detection: how it works and what to watch for

Falls are the leading cause of injury among older adults, so a fall sensor can be a lifesaver. But not all fall detection is created equal. Basic models use an accelerometer that triggers when it detects a sudden stop after a rapid descent. That sounds simple, but false alarms are common: a device might interpret a dropped bag or a quick sit-down as a fall. On the flip side, some falls are too slow or too controlled for the sensor to register, and the alert never goes out.



A better approach is multi-axis fall detection. Instead of one sensor, the device uses several to measure speed, angle, and impact. Some trackers also include a brief delay before triggering an alert, giving the wearer time to cancel it if they are fine. That reduces false alarms while still catching real falls. If you are comparing devices, ask whether the fall detection works in real time and if it can be adjusted for sensitivity. No system is perfect, but a good one will catch the vast majority of genuine falls without driving everyone crazy with false alerts.

SOS alert: simple and accessible

An SOS button is only useful if the person can reach and press it in a stressful moment. That means the button needs to be large, tactile, and placed where it is easy to find by touch alone. Many trackers put the SOS button on the front or side of the device, sometimes with a raised

ridge so it can be located without looking. Some models also allow a caregiver to trigger the alert remotely, which is handy if the wearer has dementia and cannot press the button themselves.

Check how the alert is sent. Does it go to a mobile app, a text message, or a call centre? In an emergency, you want the alert to reach someone who can act quickly. A device that sends an automatic location with the SOS is far better than one that just says "help needed." Also consider whether the alert works outside of mobile coverage. Some trackers use Wi-Fi for alerts and fail when the person is away from home. A good SOS system uses cellular or satellite backup so the alert goes through no matter where the wearer is.

Two-way communication: a feature you might not think about

Being able to talk to the person through the tracker can resolve many situations without an emergency response. If the wearer is confused or just needs reassurance, a caregiver can speak to them directly through the device. This feature is especially valuable for people with dementia who may wander and then become disoriented. Instead of sending a search party, you can call and guide them back.

Two-way communication also helps with minor issues like a forgotten phone or a missed appointment. The caregiver can check in without visiting in person. For the older person, it provides a sense of connection and reduces loneliness. When comparing trackers, test the audio quality and volume. A tiny speaker in a small device may be hard to hear for someone with hearing loss. Some trackers allow the caregiver to adjust volume remotely, which is a nice touch.

Battery life: the make-or-break factor

No matter how many features a tracker has, it is useless when the battery is dead. Battery life varies wildly, from a day to several weeks, depending on how often the device transmits location and whether it uses Wi-Fi or cellular data. A tracker that sends a location every minute will drain the battery fast. One that updates every hour will last much longer but may not be useful in an emergency.



Look for a device with a rechargeable battery that can last at least a few days under normal use. Some trackers have a power-saving mode that reduces update frequency when the person is stationary. Others have a replaceable battery that can be swapped in seconds. Avoid devices that require daily charging; they are too easy to forget. Also check whether the device alerts you when the battery is low. That warning can save you from discovering the tracker is dead only when you need it most.

Wearing options: comfort matters

An elderly person is more likely to wear a tracker that feels natural and unobtrusive. Some devices come as a pendant that hangs around the neck, others as a wristband, a clip-on, or

even a small device that goes in a pocket. The best option depends on the person's habits and physical condition. A pendant might be easy to reach for an SOS but can be uncomfortable for someone who sleeps on their side. A wristband can be left on all the time but might irritate sensitive skin.

Consider how the device is worn and whether it can be removed accidentally. Some trackers have a tamper alert that notifies you if the device is taken off. That is useful for someone with dementia who might take it off and lose it. Also think about bathing: a waterproof tracker that can be worn in the shower means one less thing to remember. The goal is a tracker that becomes a natural part of the person's daily routine, not a burden.

Monthly fees: what to expect

Most GPS trackers require a monthly subscription for cellular data and cloud services. Fees can range from a few dollars to over fifty, depending on the features. Some devices lock you into a contract; others are prepaid or pay-as-you-go. Before buying, find out what the subscription covers. Does it include location updates, SOS alerts, and fall detection? Is there a limit on the number of alerts per month? Are there extra charges for international roaming? It is worth reading the fine print because a cheap tracker can become expensive once you add the monthly fee.

Some providers, such as familyr.co.nz, offer a tracker that works without ongoing monthly fees. That can save a significant amount over time, especially if you plan to use the tracker for many years. A one-off purchase with no recurring charges is simpler to budget for and removes the risk of forgetting to renew the subscription. When comparing options, calculate the total cost over two or three years, not just the upfront price.



Finally, think about mobile coverage. A tracker that uses a specific mobile network might not work well in rural areas or overseas. Check the coverage map for the areas where the wearer lives and travels. Some trackers allow you to switch SIMs or use multiple networks, which gives more flexibility. A device that relies on a single network may leave you with no signal in a dead zone.

The bottom line

Choosing a GPS tracker for an elderly family member is about matching the features to the person's lifestyle and needs. Start with the essentials: accurate location, reliable fall detection, a simple SOS button, and two-way communication. Then consider battery life, wearing comfort, and the total cost including any monthly fees. A good tracker will give you peace of mind without adding complexity to anyone's day. Providers like familyr.co.nz show that it is possible to get a full set of safety features without a recurring subscription, but the most important thing is that the device works for the person wearing it. Take the time to test a few options, and always involve the wearer in the decision. Their comfort and willingness to wear the tracker every day is what ultimately makes it effective.