

June 2021 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames Medical Alert Systems

Medical alert systems are in-home and/or wearable devices that allow people to call for help (e.g., falling, feeling confused, injured and for other medical or healthcare needs). Typically, a medical alert device consists of a base unit and a portable emergency help button that can be worn like a bracelet or a neck pendant. The button triggers a small radio transmitter in the base station that is connected to a personal emergency response system (PERS) automatically, which could be a mobile phone, a wi-fi connection or a landline receptor, and alerts a trained care professional. The alert system is directed to a monitoring center with care professionals available around-the-clock who assess the situation and/or to loved ones who can dispatch emergency medical services to the home if necessary. The systems are made for the purpose of providing people with help when medical emergencies occur. Early intervention usually improves the chances of recovery (e.g., early treatment for heart attacks improves survival rates). One out of every three adults over 65 falls each year and recovery is much better when there is early intervention. There are some unmonitored medical alert systems available. In such devices, where there is no monthly fee or a very low initial cost, users can provide the numbers of emergency contacts who are alerted when the button is pressed during an emergency. In case the first one does not respond, it dials the next one and so on. If no one responds, then it finally dials 911. Also, there are medical ID bracelets that contain identifying information and pertinent healthcare details such as allergies and include the name of an emergency contact. They do not charge monthly fees but have limited capabilities. The unmonitored system connects directly to 911 or to the contacts the user provides but it usually lacks features like fall detection, activity tracking, and medication reminders.

Key benefits of a medical alert system include:

- Help when one needs it (systems are monitored 24 hours a day, every day).
- Ease of use. Systems are designed to be worn on the wrist or around the neck and have an open two-way communication channel with the push of a button.
- Peace of mind: it is not uncommon to develop a fear of falling. Fear affects confidence and then makes people afraid to continue many of their physical activities. When older adults limit movement, their mobility and balance decline which increases the risk of falling. Knowing that help is available offers peace of mind.
- Other reasons: monitors side effects that occur due to medications, lessens feeling anxious about living alone and getting help and/or not living close to a family member, having a health condition that can result in confusion or wandering, and assurance of being able to contact help when out of the house.

Costs of medical alert systems: when choosing a system, be aware of fees such as monthly fees, annual fees, shipping fees, activation fees, and upfront device fees. Medicare Part B **does not cover medical alert systems** (they are not considered durable equipment such as crutches and wheelchairs). Medical alert systems with no monthly fees operate similarly to those with monthly fees but the main difference is who receives the call for help in an emergency. Monitored medical alert systems connect to a call center where a representative determines the severity of the emergency. An unmonitored system directly dials family/loved ones or the 911 system. Medical alert button users only need to press the button of their device to call for help. Medical alerts often come with Fall Detection technology. This means, without even pressing a button, help can be sent in the case of an emergency both in and out the home.

The use of cell phones for medical alerts. All cell phones can call 911 or have a designated emergency button (ICE or in case of emergency). A user can download any number of apps that sync to medical devices and to a medical alert system. According to Medical Alerts Pros, the **pros of using cell/smart** phones as one's alert system include availability of a flexible budget, ease of dialing 911 in emergency, availability of emergency apps for downloading, the use of only one device to carry making traveling easier, a variety of functions or uses with the phone, and the inclusion of GPS. The **cons of using smart phones** are that they can be confusing to use, especially for older adults who are just beginning to use cell phones. The learning curve for adjusting to a new device can be frustrating. The user needs to remember to carry the phone and to remember where it is in the house. The cell phone user may need to take multiple steps before calling for help. Other issues are that the screen text may be small, phone buttons may be difficult to push or are easily miss hit, phone plans can be expensive (some are quite high), and the possibility of not having the cell phone in hand when an emergency occurs. As for expense, one may be able to download an app without additional expense. To offset the cons, companies are now offering cell phones that are made with medical emergencies in mind. These phones offer limited access to typical phone functions, such as making calls and sending texts, to keep things simple. Most often, these are flip phones with only a few buttons that allow the user to dial out for help in the event of an emergency.

In summation: medical alert systems include a variety of features, such as being able to automatically detect falls and call for help, track location, and remind one to take medications. One can opt for a simple system or for a high-tech wearable smartwatch. The more features the higher the cost. When buying, consider which features will be used and how much each cost. Review the company's policies to understand how the monitoring center works, contract obligations, and out-of-pocket fees like activation and equipment charges. A few sources that review systems and costs:

<https://www.usnews.com/360-reviews/medical-alert-system/how-to-choose> <https://www.pcmag.com/picks/the-best-medical-alert-systems> <https://www.consumerreports.org/medical-alert-systems/best-medical-alert-systems/>

Food and Drug Administration provides reports of adverse problems with medical devices (<https://www.fda.gov/Medical-Devices>)