Building a reliable emergency contact plan for an ageing parent

Why a plan matters more than a device

A medical alarm pendant or a smartwatch with fall detection gives an older person a way to call for help. But the technology is only one piece of the puzzle. Without a clear plan that tells everyone what to do when that alert arrives, a call can turn into confusion, missed steps, and delayed help. Building an emergency contact plan for an ageing parent means thinking through each scenario before it happens, so that when the SOS button is pressed, the right people know exactly what to do.

Step 1: Map the immediate response network

Start by listing the people who live closest to your parent. A neighbour who works from home, a retired friend two streets away, or a family member who lives within a ten-minute drive can all be part of the first wave of response. Write down their names, phone numbers, and typical availability. A neighbour who is away every weekday morning is not useful for a morning fall. Note those gaps and find someone else to cover them.

Once you have the list, talk to each person. Ask if they are willing to be called in an emergency. Explain what that might involve: letting themselves into the house, checking on your parent, staying until help arrives, or simply making a phone call. Be honest about the commitment. Some people will say no, and that is fine. Better to know now than during a real event.

Step 2: Set up a clear chain of contact

A single emergency contact is not enough. That person might be unreachable, on another call, or unable to respond quickly. Build a chain of at least three people, ordered by proximity and availability. The first person gets the alert. If they do not answer within a set time, the second person is notified automatically. The third person is a backup for the backup.

Many wearable alarms and GPS emergency alert systems allow you to program this kind of escalation. You can assign priority levels and set time windows for each contact. Test the chain regularly. Once a month, trigger a practice alert and see how long it takes for someone to respond. If the second person never answers during a test, swap them with someone else.



Step 3: Decide what each responder does

A vague instruction like "go check on Mum" leads to hesitation. Be specific. Write a short checklist for each person in the response network. For example:

- Call your parent immediately on their mobile or home phone.

- If there is no answer, go to their home and enter using the spare key (make sure everyone knows where it is kept).
- Check for visible injury, confusion, or signs of a fall.
- Stay on the line with your parent until paramedics or a family member arrives.
- Send a text message to the rest of the network with a status update.

Keep this list somewhere accessible. A printed copy on the fridge, a digital note shared with the group, or a pinned message in a family chat all work. The goal is to remove guesswork when stress levels are high.

Step 4: Integrate GPS location into the plan

If your parent uses a device with GPS location tracking, make sure every responder understands how to read that information. A GPS coordinate is useless if no one knows how to interpret it. Show them the map view in the app, explain what the blue dot means, and practice finding your parent using the location data during a non-emergency walk.

GPS location is especially valuable when your parent is outside the home. A fall in the garden, on a walk, or at a shopping centre can be disorienting. The responder can see exactly where they are and go straight there, rather than calling around to find them. Include this step in your plan: "If the alert includes a GPS location, check the map first before calling."

One thing to watch for is battery life. A device that is not charged cannot send a location. Build a habit of charging the device every night, and set a weekly reminder to check the battery level. If your parent tends to forget, a charging dock in a visible spot, such as beside the kettle or television remote, can help.

Step 5: Establish direct voice contact in emergencies

Many modern medical alert devices include two way communication, which means the responder can speak directly to your parent through the device itself. This is a powerful feature because it lets you assess the situation immediately. You can hear whether their voice sounds normal, whether they are confused, or whether they can describe what happened. In a fall scenario, being able to ask "Can you move your arms?" or "Do you feel dizzy?" gives you critical information before you decide what to do next.



Make sure your parent knows how to use this feature. Practice with them. Have them press the SOS button and then speak into the device while you respond from your phone. If the audio is muffled or the device is worn under clothing, adjust the placement. The goal is to establish direct voice contact in emergencies as quickly as possible, so that the responder can make a calm, informed decision about whether to send an ambulance or simply help your parent get up.

Not all devices handle two way communication the same way. Some require the responder to press a button to speak; others open a live audio channel automatically. Read the instructions for your specific device and walk through the process with everyone in the response network. A responder who fumbles with the app during a real event wastes precious time.

Step 6: Write down medical information for responders

When a responder arrives at your parent's home, they may need to give information to paramedics. Prepare a one-page document that includes:

- Full name and date of birth.
- Known allergies and medical conditions.
- Current medications and dosages.
- Doctor's name and phone number.
- Emergency contact details for family members.

Keep a copy on the fridge and another inside a clearly marked folder near the front door. Tell every responder where to find it. If your parent uses a wearable device that stores medical information, make sure it is updated and that responders know how to access it.

Step 7: Review and update the plan regularly

A plan that sits in a drawer for two years is not a plan. Set a reminder every three months to review the contact list, check that phone numbers are still correct, and confirm that each responder is still willing and able to help. If your parent's health changes, update the medical information and adjust the response steps accordingly. For example, if they start using a walking frame, responders need to know where it is kept and how to help them use it after a fall.

Also review the technology. Software updates can change how the device behaves. Battery performance can degrade. GPS accuracy can shift. Run a full test of the system each time you review the plan. Press the SOS button, check that the alert reaches the right people, and confirm that the GPS location is accurate. If something does not work, fix it immediately.



Step 8: Plan for when your parent is away from home

Emergencies do not only happen in the living room. Your parent might be at the supermarket, visiting a friend, or on a short trip. Make sure the plan covers these situations. The GPS location feature becomes essential here. The responder should know how to use the map to find your parent in an unfamiliar place. If your parent travels regularly, add a local contact in that area, such as a friend or relative who can respond faster than someone driving from home.

Also consider what happens if your parent cannot speak. A fall might leave them unconscious or unable to press the SOS button. Some devices with automatic fall detection handle this scenario by sending an alert even without a button press. The responder then relies on the GPS location and any audio from the two way communication to assess the situation. In that case, the plan should say: "If you receive a fall alert with no voice response, assume the worst and call an ambulance immediately."

Bringing it all together

An emergency contact plan is a living document. It changes as your parent's needs change, as people move, and as technology evolves. The time you invest now in setting up the chain, testing the system, and training the responders pays off in confidence and speed when a real

alert comes. And that speed, combined with a reliable GPS emergency alert system and clear communication, can make the difference between a minor incident and a serious outcome.