Steps to help older adults live safely at home with family support

Building a practical plan for independent living

For many older adults, staying in their own home is a priority. It offers comfort, routine, and a sense of control. But family members often worry about what happens if something goes wrong when no one is around. The key is to put a system in place that respects independence while keeping everyone informed. This article walks through the steps to make that happen, with practical things to watch at each stage.

Step one: assess the home environment and daily routine

Start by looking at the older adult's home and how they spend a typical day. Think about potential trouble spots: stairs, bathrooms, the kitchen, and areas where a fall could happen. Check that walkways are clear, rugs are secure, and lighting is good at night. It also helps to note their usual schedule - when they get up, when they go out, and when they might be alone for long stretches.

What to watch for: Look for hazards that could cause trips or falls. Also pay attention to any changes in mobility or balance. A person who moves carefully around obstacles today might struggle with the same obstacles tomorrow. Keep the discussion open and non-judgmental - the goal is safety, not taking away freedom.

Step two: choose a reliable communication tool

Staying connected is easier when there is a simple way to call for help. Many older adults are comfortable with a mobile phone, but it can be hard to reach during an emergency, especially if it is in another room or the person is unable to move. A wearable device with an SOS button solves that problem. It stays on the wrist or around the neck, so it is always within reach.

The device should also have two-way calling. That means the person can speak directly to a family member or a response service through the device itself, without needing to pick up a phone. This is especially useful when the older adult is outside or in a part of the house where the phone is not nearby.



What to watch for: Make sure the device has good mobile coverage in the area where the person lives. Test the range indoors and outdoors. Also check that the battery lasts long enough for their daily routine and that charging is simple. Some devices need to be charged every day, which can be forgotten. Others last for weeks.

Step three: set up a system that includes trusted contacts

An alarm that only alerts a call centre is helpful, but older adults often prefer that family members are involved too. This is where a family monitored alarm makes a real difference. The idea is that when the SOS button is pressed, the alert goes to a list of trusted contacts - usually

the adult children, a neighbour, or a close friend. These contacts can then decide how to respond, based on what the older adult needs at that moment.

For example, if the alarm is triggered because the person has fallen and cannot get up, a family member can call for an ambulance or go to the home directly. If the alarm is triggered by accident - say, while gardening - the family member can quickly confirm that everything is fine. This keeps the response personal and avoids unnecessary emergency callouts.

What to watch for: Define clear roles for each trusted contact. Who is the first person to be notified? Who is the backup? Make sure everyone knows how to use the system and what to do when an alert comes in. It can help to have a short practice session so that no one fumbles in a real emergency.

A service like familyr.co.nz offers this kind of family monitoring without monthly fees. Older adults can wear a device with SOS, GPS location, fall detection, and two-way calling, while family members receive alerts and can speak directly to the person through the device. This setup keeps the older adult connected without requiring them to learn complicated technology.

Step four: practice using the device and the response plan

Having a device is not enough. The older adult needs to be comfortable pressing the SOS button when they need help. Some people hesitate because they do not want to bother anyone, or they worry about false alarms. It helps to explain that the device is there for their safety, and that family members want to be notified - even if it turns out to be nothing serious.


SOS

Practice pressing the button and going through the two-way calling feature. Let the older adult hear how their voice will sound through the device, and let the family member practice responding. This builds confidence on both sides. Also talk about what to say in different situations: a fall, feeling unwell, or getting lost while out walking.

What to watch for: Watch for reluctance or embarrassment. Some older adults do not want to admit they might need help. Frame the practice as a "drill" that everyone does together, not as a test of the older adult's abilities. Also, update the trusted contact list if someone moves away or changes their phone number. An outdated contact list can cause delays in an emergency.

Step five: integrate the alarm into daily life

The device should become a normal part of the day, not something that is only worn when feeling unwell. Encourage the older adult to wear it all the time, even at home. Many devices are water-resistant, so they can be worn in the shower - a common place for falls. GPS location tracking also means that if the person goes for a walk or to the shops, family members can see where they are without having to call and check.

Fall detection is another feature that can be a lifesaver. If the person falls and is unable to press the SOS button, the device can automatically send an alert. This is especially important for older adults who live alone or have health conditions that might cause a sudden fall.

What to watch for: Check that the device is comfortable to wear for long periods. If it is bulky or irritating, the older adult might stop using it. Also, talk about how the GPS feature works. Some older adults worry about being tracked all the time. Explain that the location is only shared when an alert is triggered, or when the family member logs into the monitoring system. It is not a constant surveillance tool.

Step six: keep the conversation going

Safety needs change over time. What works today might not work in six months. Schedule regular check-ins - perhaps once a month or after any major health change - to review how the system is working. Ask the older adult if they feel safe and if there is anything they would like to adjust. Maybe the device needs a different strap, or the trusted contact list needs updating, or the older adult has started a new activity that changes their routine.



These conversations also strengthen the relationship between the older adult and their family. When everyone knows that there is a reliable way to get help, the older adult feels more confident being at home, and family members worry less. The family monitored alarm becomes a tool for connection, not a reminder of frailty.

What to watch for: Pay attention to signs that the older adult might be avoiding the device or downplaying its importance. That can be a signal that they feel embarrassed or that the device is not meeting their needs. Address the issue directly and work together on a solution. The goal is to support independent living, not to impose a system from above.

For families looking for a simple, no-monthly-fee option, familyr.co.nz provides a wearable medical alarm that covers all the key features: SOS alerts, GPS location, fall detection, two-way calling, and family monitoring. It is designed for older New Zealanders who want to stay in their own homes while staying close to the people who care about them.