



Choosing a personal alarm system

DLF Factsheet

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telecare - supporting independent living



Jane is 29 and has Multiple Sclerosis, a painful illness which limits Jane's mobility. She is prone to falling and requires additional support around the home to live independently.

Jane has a falls package and a range of additional intelligent telecare sensors installed in her home to monitor risks, hazards and environmental conditions. These include fall, flood and smoke detectors which automatically trigger a call to her carer or the 24 hour response centre should she require assistance.

For more information please
call Tunstall on 01977 660479
or visit www.tunstall.co.uk

Tunstall

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INTRODUCTION

Many people who live alone, or who are alone for long periods, choose to have an alarm system so that they can summon assistance should they require it.

There is a large choice of systems available, ranging from simple pull-cord alarms which activate a flashing light or bell outside the home through to autodialler alarms which dial, via a telephone, directly to a 24-hour monitoring station.

When selecting an alarm system, check that you can easily operate the activating switch. Also ensure that the person from whom you are summoning help will be able to get into your home to help you.

The aim of this factsheet is to provide first stop information on the type of alarm systems available to help with specific difficulties, and details about the useful features of some of the more popular types of alarms.

For up-to-date product and supplier information, please contact our equipment helpline, open Monday to Friday 10am - 4pm, tel: (0845) 130 9177 (calls charged at local rate); or if you use a textphone: (020) 7432 8009 (calls charged at standard rate).

Alternatively, you can write to our letter enquiry service or contact us via email at advice@dlf.org.uk. To help us give you a concise and informative reply, please provide us with as much detail as possible including information on the difficulties you are having and any solutions you have considered, including equipment ideas.

PROVISION OF ALARM EQUIPMENT

Alarms are generally regarded as daily living equipment and therefore may be provided by an occupational therapist (OT) at the social services department (social work department in Scotland). Sometimes, alarms are also provided by housing authorities. The OT can be asked to visit you at home to assess your needs and should be able to offer you advice on the most suitable alarm system, and sometimes help with provision depending on local eligibility criteria.

If you decide to buy equipment privately, it is best to try and compare the different ranges first. You may have a Disabled Living Centre near you. These are equipment demonstration centres where people can visit to see and try out ranges of equipment; and receive impartial advice to help choose appropriately. Not all centres display alarm systems. You will need to contact your nearest centre to find out if they can help you.

For details of your nearest centre contact Assist UK (see useful organisations); or look on their website www.assist-uk.org/centres

FOR PEOPLE WHO NEED TO SUMMON HELP FROM A CARER OR NEIGHBOUR

PORTABLE ALARMS

Personal alarms, also sometimes called anti-mugging devices, can be used by a disabled person to attract the attention of someone who is nearby, i.e. within earshot. There are two main types of alarms available:

- battery powered alarms that emit a loud noise when the trigger is pulled out;
- gas alarms that consist of a pressurised container that emits a loud noise when the cap is pressed.

Check that you are able to operate the alarm easily and that the carer/neighbour can hear the alarm from all positions, i.e. garden, upstairs, garage etc.

They are widely available through many high street retailers and mail order companies.

Advantages: Cheap and portable.

Disadvantages: limited to summoning help from a person within hearing distance; batteries/cylinder needs changing.

ALARMS WITH A FIXED POSITION TRANSMITTER AND FIXED POSITION RECEIVER



These alarms usually have a fixed receiver in a prominent position such as outside the front of the house and/or with a neighbour. They are activated by fixed position transmitters, for example pull cords and push buttons, inside the user's home. These alarms sound a bell or buzzer, and/or a flashing or non-flashing lights.

Multiple transmitters can be placed at strategic positions in the house. Systems that, once activated, automatically release the door lock will enable a helper to enter the house.

Advantages: cheap to install.

Disadvantages: user must be within reach of the pull-cord or button; carer must be within hearing/visual distance of the receiver.

ALARMS WITH A PORTABLE TRANSMITTER AND A FIXED POSITION RECEIVER



These alarms comprise a portable, body-worn transmitting device that can be secured around the wrist or worn as a pendant around the neck. They are activated by a press button that alerts the carer via a receiver that can be located in another room or outside the front of the house. The emergency signal is usually a bell, buzzer, vibrating pad or flashing or non-flashing light.

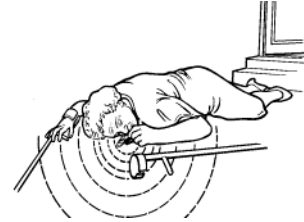
Some transmitters have an inertia alarm built-in. This means that the alarm is automatically triggered if the user does not move for a pre-set period of time.

Systems with a receiver that plugs into a standard 13 amp plug socket have the advantage of being portable for holidays, visits to friends etc.

Advantages: user has alarm trigger to hand.

Disadvantages: limited range; carer must be within hearing/visual distance of the alarm.

ALARMS WITH A PORTABLE TRANSMITTER AND A PORTABLE RECEIVER



These alarms consist of a portable, body-worn transmitting device that can be secured around the wrist or worn as a pendant around the neck. They are activated by a press button that alerts the carer, who also has a portable, body-worn receiving device. The emergency signal is usually a buzzer or vibrating pad. These alarms are usually battery operated.

Unlike fixed position transmitters and receivers they eliminate the risk of a user being unable to reach the transmitter or the carer being unable to respond to the emergency signal because the receiver is out of sight or earshot. Since portable systems will only operate within a given range, the required range should always be established to ensure that the system will remain working, for example if the user is inside the house and the carer is out in the garden.

Some systems also detect when the user has had a fall and then automatically send a signal after a pre-set period of time.

Advantages: both the user and the carer carry the alarm components with them.

Disadvantages: batteries must be regularly checked and routinely changed; limited to use within a specified range.

EMERGENCY CALL SYSTEMS FOR RESIDENTIAL HOMES

There are a large range of call systems available for residential and/or hospital use. They usually consist of a central control panel that is situated at the nursing/warden station and indicates from whom and from where the call has originated. Some systems enable the nurses/wardens to use a portable receiver as well so that if they are with another resident they are aware that another alarm call has been made.

Residents can call for assistance in a variety of ways including pull cords attached to the ceiling, pendant transmitters that are worn around the neck or fixed position wall units. Many companies will design a system to individual specifications.

Advantages: traditional and well tested system for people in sheltered complexes who may need to summon help from time to time; some systems can be upgraded to provide portable transmitters in addition to fixed pull cords/push buttons Disadvantages: station may not always be staffed 24 hours day.

FOR PEOPLE WHO NEED TO SUMMON HELP FROM FURTHER AFIELD

Autodial systems are useful for people who live alone or spend time alone and who do not have a friend, neighbour or relative nearby to help in an emergency. They are particularly useful for people with mobility difficulties who may be at risk of falling. Almost all alarms have a portable pendant transmitter that is worn around the user's neck, although other types may be available.

AUTODIALLER ALARMS - DIRECT DIAL

When the transmitter is triggered it sends a radio signal to a table top alarm unit situated in the user's home. The unit will automatically dial individual contacts such as a relative or friend. The unit is programmed with several numbers which it will dial in turn, until it receives a response. However, it must be remembered that these individuals are unlikely to be in 24 hours a day; and, if the emergency contact has an answer machine or voice mail, the message might be delivered but there may be nobody available to act immediately. Some systems have an option of dialling a 24-hour monitoring system if none of the contact people are available.

Advantages: enables the user to summon help from a familiar person who does not live in their immediate neighbourhood Disadvantages: cannot guarantee that someone will be in to receive emergency call.

AUTODIALLER ALARMS – MONITORING

Like the direct dial autodiallers these systems are useful for people who live alone and may need to summon emergency assistance. They are particularly useful for people with mobility difficulties who may be at risk of falling. They too have a portable pendant transmitter that is worn around the user's neck with the option of alternative triggers.



The transmitter sends a radio signal to a table top alarm unit situated in the user's home which will trigger the unit to automatically dial through to a central monitoring station that is staffed 24 hours a day.

Advantages: help can be summoned 24 hours a day, seven days a week; integral two-way intercom enables user to receive reassurance from the monitoring staff that help is on its way. Disadvantages: more expensive to buy and run.

FOR PEOPLE NEEDING TWO WAY VOICE CONTACT WITH SOMEONE IN ANOTHER ROOM

TWO-WAY INTERCOM SYSTEMS

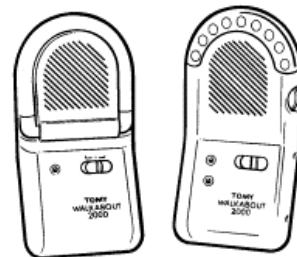
Two-way intercom systems enable sound or speech to be transmitted in two directions so that a conversation can take place.

Systems may be mains or battery operated. Some have a handset which must be used when speaking through the system, others have a 'hands-free' facility. This allows the station to transmit messages once speech is sensed. If no speech is sensed, the station remains on receive mode.

FOR CARERS NEEDING TO MONITOR A PERSON'S ACTIVITY IN ANOTHER ROOM

There are a number of alarms that can be used to make the carers role less stressful.

ONE-WAY INTERCOM



These enable sound or speech to be transmitted in one direction only. They may be useful when a disabled person is in one

room of the house and the carer is in another. The disabled person can then speak to the carer.

Most baby alarm systems work in this way. They may have a transmitter and receiver that plug into standard 13 amp plug sockets allowing them to be used between any rooms in the house. Alternatively, they may have a portable transmitter and receiver which are battery operated. This allows the user and the carer to move around but remain in contact, even in the garden or garage.

Advantages: cheap and easy to obtain.
Disadvantages: in some situations could be considered an intrusion of privacy.

FALL ALARMS

An alarm system comprising a portable transmitter that is activated when the user falls beyond 20 degrees from vertical and lies prone or supine for eight seconds. It will alert a carer in a number of ways; either a signal is sent to a portable pager or an autodial alarm telephone is triggered.

MOVEMENT MONITORS

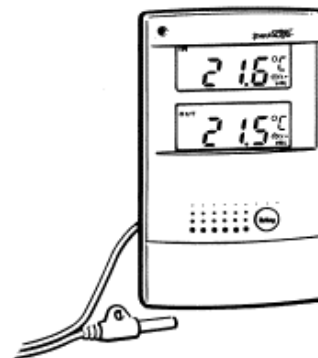
These are primarily used at night time to alert the carer to a epileptic seizure. Sensors detect movement or monitor vital signs and will automatically trigger an alarm if things are not as they should be.

WANDERING ALARMS



These are devices designed to track the movements of a person who is prone to wandering. Some comprise pressure sensors e.g. a pressure mat that is placed alongside a bed or in a door way; some monitor when there is a reduction in weight, e.g. when a person gets out of bed. Others comprise a body worn device and antennae that are fitted to the appropriate exits. If a person strays, a warning will be emitted.

HYPOTHERMIA ALARMS



These alarms monitor the ambient temperature and give a signal if this falls below a designated level. They may be useful for people who are forgetful or for people who are reluctant to put on their fire or heating due to expensive bills.

FOR PEOPLE WHO NEED TO BE ALERTED TO DANGEROUS SITUATIONS

GAS DETECTORS



A device that detects gas leaks and alerts the user with a visual, audible or vibrating alarm. Some devices automatically cut off the gas supply when gas is detected.

SMOKE/FIRE DETECTORS

Smoke alarms are legally required in all new buildings and standard smoke alarms are available through many high street retailers.



People with a hearing impairment may have difficulty in hearing a smoke alarm. Therefore, they should use one that has

a visual alarm, most commonly a flashing light. For profoundly deaf users, a vibrating alarm may be necessary. These alarms can be carried by the user or placed underneath his/her pillow at night.

Alarms should be tested at least once a month. A torch test facility is available for those users who cannot access the alarm.

Mains powered alarms are slightly more expensive but do avoid the necessity of replacing batteries. They should be installed by a qualified electrician.

A new generation of smoke alarms fit into an overhead, pendant light socket between the pendant and the light bulb.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON AUTODIALLER ALARMS

HOW THEY WORK

Autodialler alarms have some kind of push-button/pull-down transmitter that people carry around with them so that they can call for help from wherever they are in the home. These portable transmitters send a signal to the alarm unit. The transmitter is designed to be worn around the neck, on the wrist or clipped onto clothing. Some brands offer additional methods of setting off the alarm, e.g. a push button on the alarm unit itself, wall buttons or pull cords. Some alarms will go off automatically if they detect smoke, an intruder, a low room temperature or if the

user has not been moving around for a while.

Once the button has been pressed, the alarm unit will automatically contact a relative or friend or a special control centre.

An alarm that dials directly through to a relative or friend's house will usually be programmed to dial more than one number to increase the chances of finding someone at home. If the alarm has contacted a control centre then the user's details will automatically appear on a screen in front of the operator. He/she will usually try to speak to the user, often via an intercom channel that is opened up when the alarm is activated and, if help is needed or the operator cannot get a reply then he/she will arrange for someone to visit.

This could be a relative or friend; a mobile warden is available with some systems; or the control centre may call a doctor or ambulance.

CHOOSING WHO ANSWERS THE CALL

There are two main ways in which you can choose to have emergency calls answered through a control centre or by relatives or friends.

Control centre service

Most control centres are run by local authorities, or on their behalf. However,

some manufacturers, commercial firms, housing associations and charities also operate control centres.

You have to pay for the services of a control centre but there are advantages. The centres are staffed 24 hours a day 365 days a year. The staff are trained in dealing with emergencies and will contact appropriate people and services quickly. They have different ways of getting help:

- mobile wardens - the centre will send out a member of staff to help sort out the problem;
- volunteer responders - the centre will hold details of a few people you have nominated, such as neighbours and relatives living nearby who will have a set of keys to get into the house. The centre will telephone one of these people if the alarm is raised.

Dialling helpers direct

Some alarms are programmed to dial your neighbours, friend or relatives direct. They do not go through a control centre first. All call more than one number in turn but you still run the risk that there may not be anybody available to answer your call for help.

If you choose a direct dial system, choose people who:

- are on the telephone;
- live nearby or have their own transport;

- are strong enough to be able to help;
- you trust with your house keys;
- are often at home or are at home at different times of day so that it is unlikely that everyone will be out when you need them;
- do not have a telephone with a voice-mail facility or answerphone connected:
- * live in a household where everyone who is likely to answer the phone knows what to do.

You should not programme the unit to call the police, a doctor or anyone else without their prior permission.

HOW TO GET AN ALARM

There are three main ways to get an alarm:

- from your local authority;
- directly from the manufacturer;
- through a housing association or charity.

Local authority

Many local authorities run an alarm scheme. However, their rules as to who they will supply, how they run the service and their charges will differ. Contact your housing and/or social services departments to get details.

The local authority schemes can be cheaper than others and may even be free if you meet their criteria. These vary but may depend on the following:

- your age;
- your disability;
- whether you live alone for all, or the majority of the day;
- whether you are likely to have medical emergencies;
- whether medical or social services staff have recommended that you have an alarm.

Even if you are not eligible to be supplied with an alarm through your local authority you may still be able to purchase an alarm and link it into the local authority control centre. This can be cheaper than using a commercial control centre. Some authorities offer this service to people from outside their area.

MANUFACTURERS OR COMMERCIAL FIRMS

Some of the alarm manufacturers sell or rent alarms directly to the public, others only sell to local authorities. Some provide their own control centre or will advise you about local authority or commercial firms which can provide a control centre service for their alarms.

CHARITIES OR HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

Many housing associations have alarm schemes for their own residents and will provide alarm services for people living nearby.

Help the Aged can provide alarms anywhere in the country and will arrange connection to a local authority control centre. It also gives advice about choosing and obtaining an alarm. If you cannot afford to buy one it can help with funding.

COSTS

The costs for the alarm system can be divided into once only costs and on-going costs.

The once only costs include:

- telephone line and socket (if you don't have one already);
- new style plug-in telephone socket (if you don't have one already) or, if you have a new style socket, you may need an additional one for the alarm;
- alarm system, if you are buying the alarm outright.

On-going costs include:

- telephone line rental;
- telephone call costs - these will

depend on how often you use the alarm system;

- control centre charges per year - if you choose to use one and if you have to pay for the service.

FEATURES OF THE ALARM

Having decided on the type of service that you want and who will supply it, you then need to consider the alarm unit and trigger.

The alarm button

These are battery powered and are usually worn around the neck, clipped to clothing or worn like a wrist watch. You can have more than one trigger with your alarm.

Consider:

- how comfortable is it to wear?
- how easy it is to use?
- how will it stand up to everyday use?
- over what distance will it work? When the alarm is installed, test the trigger from the point furthest away from where you are likely to use it. Some alarms have the aerial in the neck cord so it is important that it is worn around the neck, and not held in a pocket with the cord wrapped around it which will reduce its range;
- other ways of setting off the alarm.

A button on the alarm unit

A button on the alarm unit allows you to set off the alarm without the trigger. This is a good idea should you mislay the trigger.

Extra triggers

These can be fitted around the house in the form of wall-fixed buttons or pull cords. When these triggers are pressed they will set off the alarm unit in the same way as the portable trigger.

Intruder alarms

Sensors can be fitted to windows and doors and are set off if anyone tries to break in. They operate the alarm system in the same way as if you had pressed the trigger.

Fire alarms

These will set off the alarm if they sense smoke.

Room temperature alarms

If the room temperature falls below a pre-set level the alarm will automatically be triggered.

Habit cycle alarms

Some units have a habit cycle button which is programmed so that you need to press it regularly, for example once in

the morning and once in the afternoon. The base unit will buzz to remind you to press the button but, if you fail to do so, the alarm will automatically be triggered.

Alternatively, some alarms can be set up so that, if you don't move around, the alarm is triggered. Sensor mats which can sense when you walk over them, or an infra-red beam which 'sees' you walking past can be set so that, should you fall and not pass for a pre-set period of time, the alarm will automatically be triggered.

Alarms with built-in telephones

Some alarms come with built-in phones. If you have an existing phone you may not want this and may choose to have a system which provides the alarm unit only.

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

Power cuts

All the alarm units work on mains electricity and some have a battery back-up. The battery will automatically cut in if the power is disconnected or fails. The alarm unit warns you if there has been a power failure or if the battery back-up is low.

Alarm call not connecting

Most alarm units will dial again, at least five times, if the call does not get through. Should this still fail to connect you with the control centre, then you can press the trigger again.

Telephone line not working

Some alarm units will give a visual or audible signal if the telephone line is not working or if the unit has been unplugged from the telephone socket.

Pressing the trigger by mistake

Most units have a cancel button which you can press to stop the call being made if you have pressed the trigger by mistake. However, the control centres don't mind receiving accidental calls.

CHECKLIST OF FEATURES TO LOOK FOR

The alarm unit

- Does it have an alarm and a cancel button?
- Are these buttons easy to use?
- Does it make more than five attempts to call for help?
- If the alarm call doesn't get through can you restart it by using the trigger?
- Does it have battery back-up power that lasts at least 8 hours?
- Does it warn you if the mains power fails or if the back-up battery is low?
- Does it warn the control centre if the

mains power fails or if back-up battery power runs low?

- Does it give a clear signal to tell you that the alarm signal is getting through?
- Does it warn you if the telephone line is faulty or disconnected?
- Does the built-in telephone carry on working even if the unit loses all power?

The portable trigger

- Is it comfortable and easy to use?
- Will it set off the alarm from anywhere in the home and garden?

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

ASSIST UK

Redbank House

4 St Chad's Street

Manchester

M8 8QA

Tel: 0870 770 2866

Fax: 0870 770 2867

Textphone: 0870 770 5913

Email: general.info@assist-uk.org

Website: www.assist-uk.org

Help the Aged (Senior Link)

847 Burnley Road,

Loveclough

Lancashire

BB4 8QL

Tel: 0845 053 2306

Fax: 01706 242839

Email: seniorlink@helptheaged.org.uk

Website:

www.helptheaged.org.uk/seniorlink

Seniorline is the division of Help the Aged that supplies an autodialler alarm system through to a monitoring service. For information on all its other services, contact its helpline on 0808 800 6565.

Ricability

30 Angel Gate City Road

London EC1V 2PT

Tel: 020 74272460

Fax: 020 7427 2468

Textphone: 020 742 2469

Email: mail@ricability.org.uk

Website: www.ricability.org.uk

Publishes a report *Calling for help* - a guide to community alarms.

Donation Form

We hope this factsheet has proven useful to you. If you would like to help the DLF continue to provide valuable information such as this, you may wish to consider making a small donation towards our work. As a charity, we rely on the generosity of the public to help us continue to help older and disabled people lead independent lives.

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Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Please accept my gift of:

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£10

£20

£30

£ _____ other

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If you would like to make a credit card donation, please call our Fundraising Department on **020 7289 6111 (ext: 254)**, or alternatively visit our website at **www.dlf.org.uk**

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NB: You must pay an amount of income tax and/or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax we reclaim on your donations in the tax year (currently 28p for every £1 you give)

Please print out and return your completed form and cheque (if applicable) to:

**Fundraising Department, Disabled Living Foundation,
380-384 Harrow Road, London W9 2HU**

Thank You

- Please tick here if you would like to receive details on how you can help by making regular donations through your bank.
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