

Will a Cell Phone Keep the Elderly Safe at Home?

Grandpa had been feeling ill and needed to go to the bathroom. He got out of bed slowly. His 83-year old legs were weak. He reached for the cell phone that his daughter gave him for emergency use and gripped it tightly. Grandpa took one step, then another. The bathroom was a few feet away. He took another step, felt his right foot dragging along the floor and then, it caught on something. Grandpa fell; the cell phone bounced away and came to rest somewhere under the bed as he went down, its little green lights glowing tauntingly. Grandpa was on the floor, too weak to move. He was scared. He felt a sharp pain in his knees. He lay there on the cold floor for 16 hours.

This is every elderly person's nightmare. But Grandpa was lucky. His fall did not leave him permanently disabled or even severely injured. Grandpa returned home after a short hospital stay. But he began to reconsider whether or not he should trust his life to a cell phone.

Cell phones are everywhere. Everyone seems to have one, even elementary school kids. We receive endless offers for new plans; ads with unbelievably happy people enjoying the dickens out of life catch our attention daily. Yes, cell phones are everywhere, but we never see the elderly in those phone ads. That's because cell phones aren't marketed to the elderly. The physical limitations we experience as we age create a number of serious barriers to cell phone usage, especially as a home safety device.

Problem #1 – Cell phones have small buttons; some are even flat. Small, flat buttons may be very difficult to press when you have diabetes (nerve loss at the finger tips) or suffer with arthritic fingers. Pressing tiny buttons require good small-muscle coordination. Many elderly people have lost a considerable amount of small-muscle control and may be struggling with hand tremors as well. Buttons appear dimly lit, at best, when you have macular degeneration, glaucoma or other vision problems. Grandpa didn't have a chance to retrieve his glasses.

Problem #2 – Listening through a cell phone's tinny little speaker port doesn't present a problem when you still have the majority of your hearing. But aging is often accompanied by hearing loss – more than 30% of people over 65 have lost enough hearing to benefit from hearing aids (Hearing Loss Association of America, www.hearingloss.org). Grandpa can only hear the tiny sounds emitted by cell phones when he has properly aligned the speaker hole with his ear. Limited hand control makes this very challenging for older people.

Problem #3 – Cell phones are powered by rechargeable batteries. If Grandpa doesn't use his phone regularly, he may not notice that his battery charge has been depleted. Someone who keeps a phone around just for emergency use will often find the batteries drained of power in their time of greatest need.

Problem #4 – EMS providers report that they cannot quickly locate a cell-phone caller. It looks so easy in the movies, but the reality is far slower. Unless Grandpa can state his address, response to his call may take quite a while. Also, check that there's adequate signal coverage throughout Grandpa's home in order for his cell phone to be useful. And make sure that Grandpa can handle the phone when he's using his cane or walker. If Grandpa drops the phone, he might trip on it and fall, or worse, fall while he's bending over to find it on the ground.

Problem #5 – Cell phones aren't waterproof, so they can't be carried into the shower. This is a serious problem as most elders will say they are scared to death of falling when they are in the bathroom. Will a cell phone ease their fears? Not once they've seen an electronic gadget burst into pieces when dropped on a hard floor.



With the best of intentions, we make decisions for our elders without fully understanding how aging affects their perceptions and physical abilities. Technology's rapid development leaves many of us breathless and struggling to keep up. The features that give cell phones their cool factor – touchscreens, synthesized sounds, tiny buttons – baffle the elderly.

Try this – give Grandpa your phone and have him make a call and carry on a conversation. It isn't as easy for him as it is for you. Now imagine the same thing occurring during a crisis where Grandpa has fallen and needs emergency help.

There are a small number of cell phone companies trying to serve the elderly population like the Jitterbug www.jitterbug.com. But beware. There are a number of consumer complaints of the Jitterbug and Great Call Inc., which can be found by googling 'jitterbug phone complaints'. Verizon Wireless www.verizonwireless.com also offers a number of phones made by Samsung, Nokia, Motorola and LG which are designed to be used by the elderly. But making the buttons larger and more brightly lit and simplifying the interface doesn't solve all the problems inherent with cell phone use; incomplete coverage areas, not being water- or shock-proof, and keeping the phone charged are still serious shortfalls.

So what can you do to keep your elderly loved ones safe in the home? The most reliable method to date is still the Personal Emergency Response Service or help button, ie. help I've fallen and can't get up. It is simple to use, waterproof and does not require periodic recharges. You can be visually impaired or have a hearing loss and your safety will not be compromised.

The button component (remote activator) is comfortably worn on the wrist or around the neck. The buttons are also exposed to vigorous shock, heat and water testing to ensure they can withstand soaking, temperature extremes and being dropped on a hard floor. This is true if the PERS unit carries the UL (Underwriter's Laboratory) certification. Check your provider. Not all PERS units are UL-certified.

Additional features include text and voice messaging to responders (for those of us who do use cell phones daily) and online/email reporting to keep other family members in the loop if they live too far away to be physical responders.

Adaptive switches are available for people whose motor functions are severely limited by stroke, Muscular Sclerosis, spinal cord and head injuries or even near-complete paralysis. Many reputable companies sell these services including SafeCall www.safecall.biz, the company I started in 1995. This service costs about \$1/day and has a long history of providing home safety to the elderly and disabled.

The PERS unit is the gateway to numerous other beneficial products. Automated medication dispensers, motion sensors, pressure-sensitive floor pads, door alarms and smoke detectors are among numerous accessories that integrate with a PERS to contact caregivers within seconds of alarming.

While the cellular phone industry has begun to recognize the safety needs of the elderly (which don't include texting, music players and downloading apps), they still need to overcome issues of battery life and signal loss in large apartment buildings and rural communities. And cell phones still need to be designed for users with unsteady hands, poor sight and hearing. Home medical alarms manufacturers resolved these issues years ago.

Sanford Freed is the owner of SafeCall Inc., a home medical alarm company based in Grand Rapids Michigan. SafeCall has been helping family caregivers since 1995 by delivering emergency help button service, automated medication dispensers, wander alarms and other home technology services.