Creating an outdoor safety plan for older adults

Why a safety plan matters for outdoor time

Spending time outdoors - whether for a short walk, gardening, or meeting friends - is good for physical and mental wellbeing. But for older people, the risks that come with being outside can be higher. Uneven paths, changes in weather, fatigue, or a sudden health event can turn a routine outing into a worrying situation. A clear outdoor safety plan helps reduce those risks. It gives the person confidence and gives their family peace of mind. The plan does not need to be complicated. It just needs to cover a few key areas so that everyone knows what to do if something goes wrong.

Communication devices that work when you are out

When someone is outside, a phone in a pocket is not always enough. Mobile coverage can be patchy in parks, bush walks, or coastal tracks. Even when there is signal, a person who has fallen or feels unwell may not be able to unlock a phone and dial. That is where a personal GPS alarm becomes useful. It is a small device that can send an SOS alert with the user's location, even if the user cannot speak. For someone who lives alone or spends time outdoors by themselves, carrying such a device means help can be called quickly without needing to find a phone.



What to include in your outdoor safety checklist

The following points are practical things to think about before heading out. They are not meant to be overwhelming. Pick the ones that suit the person and the activity. Over time, they will become natural habits.

1. Check the device battery before leaving

A personal GPS alarm is only useful if it has power. Make it a habit to check the battery level before any outdoor trip. Most devices show the charge on a small screen or with a coloured light. If the battery is low, charge it or replace it before going out. Some devices last several days on a single charge, but it is wise to check each time, especially before a longer walk or a trip to an unfamiliar area.



2. Share the plan with someone

Before heading out, tell a family member or friend where you are going and roughly when you expect to be back. This is a simple step that can make a huge difference if you are delayed or unable to call. Some personal GPS alarms include a location-sharing feature that lets a nominated person see your whereabouts on their phone in real time. This can be set up once and then runs automatically, so you do not need to remember to send a message each time you go out.

3. Choose a route that suits your energy

Outdoor activity should be enjoyable, not exhausting. Pick a walking route that matches your current fitness and energy levels. Think about the terrain - is it flat or hilly? Are there rest spots like benches or cafes along the way? If you are trying a new path, check it on a map first. Some older adults find it helpful to set a geofence on their personal GPS alarm. A geofence is a virtual boundary around a chosen area. If the person leaves that area, the device can send an alert to a family member. This is especially useful for someone who wanders or gets confused easily.

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4. Dress for the weather and carry essentials

New Zealand weather can change quickly. A sunny morning can turn into a chilly afternoon. Wear layers that can be added or removed. A hat and sunscreen are important even on cloudy days. Carry water, a small snack, and a fully charged personal GPS alarm. If you use a walking stick or a mobility aid, take it even for short trips. It is better to have it and not need it than to be caught without it.

5. Know how to use the SOS feature

Having a personal GPS alarm is only helpful if the person knows how to use it. Practise pressing the SOS button at home so it becomes automatic. Some devices have a fall detection feature that automatically sends an alert if a fall is detected. This can be a lifesaver if the person is unconscious or unable to press the button. Check that the device's two-way voice feature works clearly, so the monitoring service can talk to the person and assess the situation.



Including the device in daily routines

For many older people, remembering to carry a device every time they step outside can be a challenge. One way to make it stick is to keep the device in the same place as the keys or the walking shoes. Some people attach it to a belt loop or wear it on a lanyard so it is always with them. The goal is to make it as routine as putting on a jacket. Once it becomes a habit, the person will not have to think about it.

When you are out with others

Even if the older person is usually accompanied by a family member or friend, it is still worth having a personal GPS alarm. The companion may need to go to the car or get help, and the

older person could be left alone briefly. In that short time, a fall or medical event could happen. The device means the person can call for help without waiting for the companion to return. It also allows the companion to move freely, knowing the person is not completely isolated.

Planning for different outdoor activities

The type of outdoor activity affects what you need in the safety plan. For a gentle walk in a local park, the main concerns are uneven ground and the possibility of getting lost. A personal GPS alarm with location sharing and a geofence is very useful here. For a longer hike or a trip to the beach, you also need to think about sun protection, enough water, and the device's battery life. For gardening at home, the risks are different - bending and lifting can cause dizziness or a fall. Even in the backyard, a personal GPS alarm within reach can make a difference.

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Some families choose to set up a personal GPS alarm from a provider that includes monitoring without monthly fees. For example, familyr.co.nz offers family-monitored alarms that do not require a subscription. This can be a good option for people who want the security of a monitored device but prefer a one-off cost rather than ongoing payments. The device can be used indoors and outdoors, and the family can track the person's location through a simple app.

Reviewing the plan regularly

An outdoor safety plan is not a one-time thing. As the person's health changes or as seasons change, the plan may need to be updated. Maybe the person now uses a walker and needs a different way to carry the device. Maybe a new walking route has opened up, or a favourite path has become too steep. Sit down together every few months and talk about what is working and what is not. Small tweaks can keep the plan effective without making it feel like a burden.



It is also worth checking that the personal GPS alarm is still working properly. Test the SOS button, check that the location sharing still works, and make sure the battery holds a charge. If the device has been dropped or exposed to water, it may need to be replaced. Keeping the device in good condition is part of the safety plan.

Encouraging independence through planning

The point of an outdoor safety plan is not to limit the person's freedom. It is to make freedom safer. When the person knows that help is only a button press away, they may feel more confident going out on their own. The family also feels less worried. A good plan balances preparation with trust. It gives the older person the tools they need to enjoy their outdoor activities, while knowing that someone will be alerted if they need help.

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For families who want a simple and reliable solution, a personal GPS alarm from a provider like familyr.co.nz can be a central part of that plan. The device works without monthly fees and is monitored by family members, which means the person stays connected to the people who care about them most. Whether it is a daily walk around the block or a weekend trip to the beach, having a safety plan in place makes the time outdoors more enjoyable for everyone.