

# Home alone?

Personal medical alarms and monitors give peace of mind, and help many Kiwis remain independent in their own homes.

**By Diana Noonan**

For some of us, personal medical alarms are a wondrous innovation, enabling us to carry on with the lives we've always enjoyed. For others (usually those who don't need or know little about them), these discreet little devices can feel like the end of independence and, quite literally, a chain around our necks.

Personal medical alarms (PMAs) are a relatively new invention. They were developed in Germany, and first became available in the early 1980s. Now, demand for them is growing so steadily that you're almost sure to know of someone who wears one as a pendant around their neck or a 'watch' band around their wrist. These high-tech gadgets are viewed as so essential that, currently, more than 54,000 New Zealanders receive a Disability Allowance for the purpose of funding them.

PMAs are just one of a wide range of devices designed to help people stay independent and well cared for in their homes and in community facilities. Similar technology has been used to develop highly useful sensor mats. Positioned on the floor beside a bed, these will trigger an alarm if they aren't stepped on in the morning (signalling to a neighbour, family member, or emergency call centre that the wearer may not be well enough to get out of bed). Monitors can also trigger alarms if a person doesn't switch on their stove, flush their toilet, or generally carry out their regular everyday behaviours – all signals that they may require help.

## CHOOSING AN ALARM

If the very thought of being so 'watched' has you feeling claustrophobic, bear in mind that there are no cameras involved in the monitoring, and that this sort of equipment may mean more, not less, personal freedom. During times of rehabilitation or long term disability, the user won't have to compromise their independence or privacy by sharing their home with a full-time live-in carer, or face a temporary or permanent move to residential care.

PMAs and similar devices can also be a boon to families or friends caring for others with high needs, giving the carer a degree >



## MANAGING MEDICATIONS

Bill is 82 and a 'bloke with a shed'. He's always tinkering about with his wood turning or handyman projects, which is why remembering to take his medication is often the last thing on his mind. Without a reminder, Bill's unlikely to remember the blood pressure pills he needs to take four times a day. The personal medical alarm pendant Bill wears around his neck (with an extended range so it still operates in the shed, 150 metres from his house) is the answer. When he's due for his next dose of medication, folk at the call centre contact him via the microphone on his pendant. It only takes a minute for Bill to reach into his pocket for his pills – and it keeps his worried daughter off his back!



of personal freedom. Anyone who lives with an advanced dementia sufferer knows how exhausting 24/7 vigilance can be.

But with an alarm-equipped sensor mat positioned where you want it, there's no need to listen for every footstep in the passage.

And a PMA which can detect sudden falls frees a carer to go about daily tasks such as gardening or hanging out washing, knowing that if they are needed they'll be instantly alerted.

## IS AN ALARM FOR ME?

People who consider wearing a PMA often fit into two categories: those who really do require an alarm for personal safety, and those who simply feel more comfortable (for whatever reason) if they have one.

Category one wearers are usually motivated to obtain a PMA after discussion with a medical professional assures them this is in their best interest.

It may be that a medical condition makes it dangerous for them to live alone without an alarm, or that the only other alternative is to move into a supported care environment.

Medical professionals will never advise wearing a PMA if it is not warranted.

If you've trusted your GP's opinion up until now, it's time to trust it again.

In some cases, on a medical professional's recommendation, funding for a PMA may be available from Work and Income through a Disability Allowance.

Category two folk, although not advised by their GP that a PMA is necessary, may still consider wearing one.

Living in isolated situations, for example, where family or visitors are unlikely to call on a daily basis, means that much needed help may be slow to arrive if not summoned in an emergency situation.

If personal security technology is desirable, it need not be in the form of a PMA. One of these less high-tech personal security solutions might be the answer:

Prearranged morning and evening phone calls to a friend or family member who will be alerted if they don't receive these.

Carrying a mobile phone in your pocket (even a cordless phone will suffice if you are within range of its base unit). Program the phone to dial a help number with the touch of just one (or any) key.

Phones such as the Oricom TP170

## TOP TIPS! SHOPPING FOR A PERSONAL MEDICAL ALARM

**Beware door-to-door or telemarketing PMA sellers, especially those who offer 'free alarms' (they will almost certainly be referring to government funding – which you may not be eligible for).**

**Don't make cost your only consideration. Choose a reliable company with a service to suit your individual needs.**

**Ensure that the alarm company is Work and Income NZ approved (you may not qualify for funding now, but if you are eligible in the future, you're unlikely to want to change companies).**

**Check that the company services its own products rather than contracting this out to a third party.**

**Look carefully at lease arrangements. Your company may supply a 36 month contract when all you require is an alarm for a 3 month period of rehabilitation. Medi-Mate (phone 0800 699 322) is a company which offers a service contract with no minimum term.**

**Use the Internet to check reviews of alarm companies and their PMA plans. The public will soon let you know if they're not happy with anything!**

**Some medical alarm companies offer special deals for clients living in the same residential home. Each person has their own personal pendant, but they share the same alarm. It's ideal for couples or flatmates – and it can cut costs dramatically. St John offers this service free of charge, other companies for around \$2.00 a week for each extra person requiring an alarm.**

**Regular button-operated alarms don't suit everyone. Arthritic fingers, for example, may lack the strength to depress them. That's why medical alarm companies have a range of switches to suit every user. Ask about alarms that can be activated through the lightest press, or simply by blowing on them.**

**While some medical alarm call centres prefer to immediately phone an emergency service (ambulance or fire, for example) when you activate your alarm and don't then respond to a phone call, others, such as Bupa Care Services and St John, are comfortable working with whatever prearranged phone list you have put in place. This is because emergency services, while always a priority, are not always required, and a friend or neighbour may be the better contact option.**

(around \$200) come with a waterproof pendant operational within a range of 30 metres from its base unit. When a button on the pendant is pressed, the phone will automatically dial a number that you have pre-programmed. For enquiries, phone 0508 476 527.

## CHOOSING AN ALARM

As with most products these days, there are almost too many personal medical alarm and monitor providers to choose from.

Read brochures carefully and ask questions before committing yourself to any one company.

Although the services offered by each are usually similar, variations can make a

big difference depending on your individual needs and preferences.

St John, for instance, provides a personal medical alarm that offers 'high needs' clients the reassurance of an on-board activity sensor.

In this case, the alarm looks for morning activity that is in line with the client's usual routine. If it doesn't register movement at this time, a plan is activated to verify the client's safety without them even having to push their alarm button – an invaluable service for those with diabetes, particularly for sufferers of hypoglycaemia.

## SUMMONING HELP

Most alarms systems are 'wireless', so there is no need for you to be connected

to any appliance in order to receive help.

You simply wear a discreet device that you press when you require help or (in the case of a monitor) activate through some other action or inaction. (If you accidentally activate your medical alarm, you can easily let your call centre know what has happened by phoning them. The staff will always be understanding). A radio signal then connects to the base unit, a small appliance similar in size to a telephone which is situated in your home. The base unit is connected to your telephone, which will automatically dial your alarm company's call centre.

You will then receive a reply phone call which you can respond to by picking up the telephone receiver or, if you wear a pendant with a built-in microphone, speaking into that. If you don't respond to the call centre, staff will be alerted to either request an emergency service or to phone friends or family, whichever you have arranged with the alarm company.

Alarm companies provide security boxes, located outside your home, in which your house keys can be safely stored for just such an occasion.

After you've activated your alarm, most services' call centre staff will stay on the phone, talking to you until help arrives.

Bupa personal alarms also offer 3-way voice communication. This means that the folk at the Bupa call centre and, for example, ambulance staff, can all be in contact with you at the same time. This situation allows the professional medical team to offer you (or the friend or family member helping you) valuable advice while the ambulance is on its way.

St John is in the unique situation of not only offering alarms, but also in most cases the emergency service you may require. With St John, there's no double handling of communications – when you push your alarm, you are contacting those who administer the ambulance service. St John staff are also in the position of being able to make an expert assessment of the situation, invaluable when, at times, the problem is more serious than the caller realises.

**DON'T MAKE COST YOUR ONLY CONSIDERATION. CHOOSE A RELIABLE COMPANY WITH A SERVICE TO SUIT YOUR INDIVIDUAL NEEDS, AND LOOK CAREFULLY AT LEASE AND SERVICE ARRANGEMENTS.**

## HOT POTS

Alice is 42 and, despite recovering from a recent head injury, she's able to care for herself in most ways when her family is at work and school. The only problem is that Alice's memory is temporarily impaired, so when she's cooking lunch or preparing the evening meal, it's possible she may forget a boiling pot on the stove. The potential for a kitchen fire is a concern. A monitored smoke detector is the answer to Alice's situation. Installed in her kitchen, the moment the detector is activated, it sends a message to an emergency call centre which, if it can't contact Alice by phone (because, for instance, she's gone for a walk or to visit a neighbour), alerts the fire service. Alice feels more confident with the monitored detector in the house, and her husband can rest easy while he's at work.

## SERVICING

Most alarm companies will service your alarm equipment on a regular basis. Bupa not only provides six-monthly visits from agents, who will clean and test the alarm equipment in your home, it also offers refresher training on how to use it.

If you like to buy 'New Zealand-made', Safelink, a Tauranga-based alarm company which operates nationwide, boasts that it is 100% New Zealand owned and operated. Similarly, all income derived by St John from its medical alarm business goes back to the community by supporting its ambulance service and St John volunteers.

Many people who use medical alarms live alone, and will appreciate the fact that Bupa, Safelink and St John all have a 'family' feel about them, and regularly send out newsletters. These are likely to contain not only the latest news about alarms, but also jokes, recipes, and an informal update from the editor.

As a client of one of these companies, you can also expect to receive birthday and Christmas cards (look out for the tea bags that sometimes come with the latter!).

## LEASE OR BUY, NEW OR REFURBISHED?

The cost of PMAs doesn't differ significantly from company to company (leases are usually around \$20 per week), however



options about how to obtain the equipment do. Some companies have a range of lease packages, while others are happy to sell medical alarms (currently the cost for alarm equipment is around \$400).

If you do decide to purchase, you will also need to pay a monthly monitoring-only fee. If you are considering purchasing an alarm, look out for companies such as CSL (phone 0800 266 782). This North Island-only company offers refurbished equipment, making possible a cheaper, yet still very reliable, medical alarm.

## FAST FORWARD

Imagine this: an appliance (it looks a little like the screen on a computer) which is based in your home and lets you speak directly to your GP, nurse, or medical specialist. You see the medical professional on screen, and they see you. It's just like having a doctor's appointment, but you don't have to drive to >

the clinic. You'll be prompted to take various health readings such as blood pressure, weight, and blood sugar levels (to name just a few). Your medical professional then studies the results, offers advice if necessary, or congratulates you on how well you're managing your health.

They can also share the results with your other medical specialists.

After the face to face 'appointment', you may be asked to read some articles that relate to your health issues.

Does it all sound like science fiction?

It's not – in fact medical technology is advancing so rapidly that this sort of appliance will be available in New Zealand by the end of the year. Technology giant Intel's new Care Innovations Group has developed this emerging way to manage health care, and with rising health costs and a growing population of older people and those living at home with health and disability needs, New Zealanders are sure to welcome it.

## ALARMING NEWS

Wellington general practitioner Dr Jane Burrell is disturbed that some people, especially the elderly, are receiving unsolicited phone calls or door-to-door knocks from unscrupulous medical alarm vendors. Such calls often leave householders worried and confused, and with a disability form in their hands which they are encouraged to take to their GP to sign.

"This 'cold calling' is nothing more than touting for business, and GPs will not automatically recommend a Disability Allowance for the sake of funding if a medical alarm is not required," she says.

With growing demands on health spending, Dr Burrell says GPs are having to be ever more discerning about signing Disability Allowance applications. This can be a sensitive issue, especially in situations where family wish to ensure that elderly parents are within reach of an alarm ... but may not actually need one.

## Q&A

### How can I pay for a medical alarm?

A common concern for people advised to wear a medical alarm is, "how can I afford to pay for it?" Work and Income may be able to assist with medical alarm costs for people who are eligible for a Disability Allowance. This Allowance helps to pay for costs associated with a person's disability, including medical alarms. The maximum available is \$59.12 per week towards all costs.

### Do I qualify for a Disability Allowance funded medical alarm?

If you believe your disability needs would be assisted by a medical alarm, talk to your GP, who will be able to assess your situation. Work and Income can then talk to you about your income, circumstances and which costs might be covered by a Disability Allowance. To discuss your situation, call Work and Income Senior Services on 0800 552 002.

### Which companies offer Disability Allowance funded medical alarms?

Currently you can select your personal medical alarm from one of 45 Work and Income-approved suppliers. This number may change in the future because the Government has announced that there will be a new supplier approval process. The changes will focus on achieving better value for money for people accessing medical alarms through the Disability Allowance. Any changes will take effect from early 2012. If you currently have a medical alarm funded through the Allowance, this will continue in the future – your eligibility won't change. Work and Income will work hard to ensure that any changes for clients are minimal. If you have any concerns about your medical alarm service, you should contact your alarm company.

### I already receive a Disability Allowance and use all of it for other items. How can I now afford a medical alarm?

Medical alarms can usually be fully covered by the Disability Allowance for costs that can't be covered from other funding sources. If you are currently



receiving the maximum \$59.12 available per week, you can choose what you spend the Allowance on. If necessary, you may need to fund the balance yourself.

### If I press my medical alarm button and an ambulance is sent, how will I pay for the callout?


Most medical alarm companies will cover the cost of ambulance callouts. If they don't, you will need to budget for this (your Disability Allowance will be of help). When the ambulance callout fee is a one-off, and you can't afford it because of hardship, assistance may also be available through a Work and Income Special Needs Grant.

### My life depends on my alarm, how do I know I can count on my medical alarm company?

Currently, a Work and Income approved medical alarm supplier is required to abide by the Code of Professional Conduct for Approved Suppliers of Monitored Medical Alarms. You can view a copy of the Code at the Work and Income website,

[www.workandincome.govt.nz](http://www.workandincome.govt.nz)

If you believe an approved supplier has breached the Code, you should make a complaint to the supplier. If you are not happy with their response, you can call Senior Services on 0800 552 002 or discuss your concerns with your case manager. Information about medical alarms can be viewed at

[www.workandincome.govt.nz/individuals/forms-and-brochures/disability-allowance-medical-alarms-factsheet.html](http://www.workandincome.govt.nz/individuals/forms-and-brochures/disability-allowance-medical-alarms-factsheet.html) 

**Thanks to Merv Dacre, Senior Services General Manager, Ministry of Social Development, for answering these questions.**



BUPA CARE SERVICES

SUPPORTING OLDER  
NEW ZEALANDERS

0800 60 80 99

[www.bupa.co.nz](http://www.bupa.co.nz)

Bupa Care is proud to assist older New Zealanders along the aging journey. We offer support for those who are able to live independently in their own homes, through personal medical alarms and retirement villages. We also care for people in greater medical need, in our rest homes and hospitals.

Our special focus is dementia care, making each day as enjoyable as it can be, while supporting each family on their individual journey.

*Taking care of the lives in our hands*

In an emergency a St John medical alarm could make all the difference.



*Living Independently*

➤ St John medical alarms support thousands of people to live independently in their own homes.

Often the amount of time it takes to get help can be critical to how well someone recovers from a fall. Our St John medical alarm connects you directly with St John so you can quickly access the care you need from the organisation you know and trust. It's part of St John's goal of helping New Zealanders to preserve their independent living. If you value your independence but would like a little extra support, consider a St John medical alarm. Our service begins with a free trial period of up to 1 month.\*



0800 50 23 23



[www.stjohnmedicalalarm.org.nz](http://www.stjohnmedicalalarm.org.nz)



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