
A Buyer's Guide to Personal Emergency Systems

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Quick Summary

Personal emergency response systems, or PERS, are home devices that connect your parent to a 24-hour call center with the push of a button. The transmitter is typically worn on a neck pendant or wristband, and it sends a signal to a receiver that's connected to the home telephone line. When your parent pushes the button, the staff at the call center evaluates the situation, deciding whether to call an ambulance or a designated friend or family member. With most PERS setups, your parent can talk with the call center staff from anywhere in the house.

Best For

- A parent who's at risk for falling or having a heart attack somewhere in his house or yard.

Not So Good For

- A parent with advanced dementia who may not know to push the PERS button in an emergency. Also, if your parent is frequently away from home, a cell phone is the best choice for emergency calls, since a PERS button only works through the home phone line.

Look For

- Product and service warranties
- Free trial periods
- Readily available customer service
- Easy-to-understand pricing plans

Watch Out For

- Hard-sell tactics (including insistence on home sales visits)
- Resistance to answering questions or providing company information
- Complex pricing plans

Tip

There are two levels of PERS providers: national and local. Some local companies are run by hospitals or social service agencies. A typical Internet search will bring up only the national companies. Adding a town, county, or state to your search will help you find regional options. It's worth checking out both types of service, as they both have strengths and weaknesses.

The Full Report

It's hard not to be nagged by fears of "what if" when your older mom or dad spends hours at home alone. What if she falls and can't get up? What if he has another heart attack and can't reach the phone?

One source of reassurance is a personal emergency response system (PERS) – a home-based emergency alert service that's activated with the push of a remote-control button. When your parent pushes the help button, an emergency call center is notified through her home telephone line. (The systems don't work with cell phones.) Buttons are usually attached to a pendant worn around the neck, a bracelet, a belt clip, or located on a console in the home.

With numerous PERS on the market, it can be daunting to figure out which system is right for your parent. As with any service or product, there's a range of features, pricing, and quality available. Arming yourself with a little information can help you shop wisely.

What's included in a personal emergency response system?

A basic PERS package consists of two things: the equipment and a call service. The equipment includes a receiver console that plugs into a regular telephone jack and a small battery-operated push-button transmitter, usually attached to a pendant or bracelet. When your parent pushes the transmitter's help button from anywhere in the house, it signals the receiver console to call the system's emergency response center.

In most systems, the console functions as a communication system between the response center and the home, like a powerful version of the speaker mode on a telephone. If your dad falls in the bathroom and pushes his PERS button, he can converse with the response center staff even if the console is yards away in the living room. As with any speaker-phone system, the range of communication depends on conditions such as the size and design of the house. Larger homes may need more than one console.

PERS businesses vary, although they all use similar technology. Some companies staff and operate their own response centers. Others contract this service out. Larger companies usually offer nationwide service with several response centers in different locations. For example, your parent's response center may be in Milwaukee, even if she lives in Oregon. Smaller, more regional PERS companies are often run by hospitals or social service agencies.

How do personal emergency service providers work?

Think of the PERS service center as a kind of information hub designed to quickly link your parent with the outside world, including you. With the majority of companies, you provide detailed information about your parent, including a medical history, a list of doctors, allergies, and special conditions, as well as contact names and numbers.

The staff at the response center screens calls and decides what action to take, such as whether to call 911 or a relative or to talk the caller through the situation. This is similar to any emergency dispatch center.

In a PERS center, however, the caller's name and medical history immediately pops up on a computer screen, and the staff follows protocol based on the information you've given them. If you've asked them to call you whenever your dad pushes his help button, regardless of the situation, they can do this. If you live across town, the state, or the country, you can instruct them to first call your cousin Sally or Pastor Tom, who live near your dad. (Of course, it's best to OK this plan with Sally or Tom first.)

If your parent pushes the button and the response center doesn't hear anything on the line, they'll call 911 and then follow the notification protocol. Because PERS services operate through regular telephone lines, the caller's address is visible to the staff as well. Most systems function even if the phone is busy or off the hook, essentially breaking in -- called "seizing the line."

How much do personal emergency response systems cost?

In most cases, PERS equipment is leased with a monthly service fee. Some companies offer the option to buy the equipment.

Just as there's a sea of PERS services available, there's a wide range of pricing plans. It's strongly advisable to compare services and prices before signing on the dotted line. Larger companies are highly competitive and tend to copycat each other's prices, not unlike the airline industry.

Almost all companies give discounts for longer-term agreements, but be wary of contracts that lock you in. A few services, usually the smaller, regional ones, offer pricing options for lower-income seniors.

In addition to offering basic PERS service, some companies provide extras -- such as check-in calls, wake-up calls, medication reminders, and language translation -- for an additional cost.

When choosing a service, pay attention to the small print and always ask for price quotes in writing (e-mail is fine). Most health insurance plans don't pay for PERS, but it's worth checking, especially if your parent is recovering from an illness or a medical procedure.

How do I decide which system to buy?

All these choices and options can certainly be confusing. There's been a boom in the PERS market in recent years because of the growing elderly population, leading to a kind of Wild West of pricing and service.

Start by talking over the idea with your parent. Get as much input as possible. Ask if she's open to using a PERS device and, if so, whether she'd prefer a bracelet, pendant, or one of each. Explain to her how the system works. It's only effective if your parent is willing and able to push the button. This may take a little convincing, but you can emphasize how having this reassurance gives her greater independence, the ability to live in her home without full-time care. And, yes, PERS devices really do save lives.

Next, talk to different companies and [compare their service options](#).

Also, talk to friends, relatives, doctors and nurses, caretakers at senior centers and nursing homes, even your local police or fire department. Search online. Check with your county's senior agencies. Ask what they've heard, the good and the bad.

The difference between a great PERS company and a not-so-good PERS company often boils down to service, both how the system delivers technologically over time and how the company treats and takes care of its customers.

Keep in mind that PERS services are generally considered to be tremendously helpful for the elderly and come highly recommended by the medical community and senior organizations. Many excellent providers are out there. Unfortunately, a few unethical ones have clouded the industry's reputation. But by checking around and doing some legwork, it's pretty easy to find a decent service for your parent, wherever he lives.