

How to choose a Personal Emergency Response System

Produced with the American Association of Retired Persons by the FTC.

How a PERS Works

A PERS has **three** components: a small radio *transmitter* (a help button carried or worn by the user); a *console* connected to the user's telephone; and an *emergency response center* that monitors calls.

When emergency help (medical, fire, or police) is needed, the PERS user presses the transmitter's help button. It sends a radio signal to the console. The console automatically dials one or more pre-selected emergency telephone numbers. Most systems can dial out even if the phone is in use or off the hook. (This is called "seizing the line.") Most PERS are programmed to telephone an emergency response center where the caller is identified. The center will try to determine the nature of the emergency. Center staff also may review your medical history and check to see who should be notified.

If the center cannot contact you or determine whether an emergency exists, it will alert emergency service providers to go to your home. With most systems, the center will monitor the situation until the crisis is resolved.

Transmitters

Transmitters are light-weight, battery-powered devices that are activated by pressing one or two buttons. They can be worn on a chain around the neck or on a wrist band, or they can be carried on a belt or in a pocket. Because the transmitter is battery-powered, the batteries must be checked periodically to ensure they work. Some units have an indicator to help you know when to change batteries.

The Console

The console acts as an automatic dialing machine and sends the emergency alert through the phone lines. It works with any private telephone line and generally does not require rewiring. If you have more than one phone extension, a special jack or wiring may be required to enable the console to seize the line.

Emergency Response Center

There are two types of emergency response centers - provider-based and manufacturer-based. Provider-based centers usually are located in the user's local area and are operated by hospitals or social service agencies. Manufacturer-based operations usually have one national center. Sometimes, consumers who purchase systems can choose between provider-based and manufacturer-based centers, but consumers who rent systems from a PERS manufacturer usually must use its national center.

Purchasing, Renting, or Leasing a PERS

A PERS can be purchased, rented, or leased. Neither Medicare nor Medicaid, in most states, will pay for the purchase of equipment, nor will most insurance companies. The few insurance companies that do pay require a doctor's recommendation. Some hospitals and social service agencies may subsidize fees for low-income users. Rentals are available through national manufacturers, local distributors, hospitals, and social service agencies. Monthly fees may range from \$15 to \$50 and usually include the monitoring service.

Lease agreements can be long-term or lease-to-purchase. If you lease, review the contract carefully before signing. Make special note of cancellation clauses, which may require you to pay a cancellation fee or other charges.

Ask about the repair policy. Find out how to arrange for a replacement or repair if a malfunction occurs.

Before doing business with companies selling PERS, you may want to contact your local consumer protection agency, state Attorney General's Office, and Better Business Bureau (BBB). Ask if any complaints have been filed against the companies you are considering. You also may want to get recommendations from friends, neighbors, or relatives who use emergency response systems.

Shopping Checklist

To help you shop for a PERS that meets your needs, consider the following suggestions:

- Check out several systems before making a decision.
- Can you use the same system if you move?
- Ask about the pricing, features, and servicing and compare costs.
- Make sure the system is easy to use.
- Test the system to make sure it works in and around your home.
- Read your purchase, rental, or lease agreement carefully before signing.

You also may want to ask questions about the response center:

- Is the monitoring center available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week?
- What is the average response time?
- What kind of training does the center staff receive?
- What procedures does the center use to test systems in your home? How often are tests conducted?

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