

## For Our Longer Lives

By Kathy Werle

### Choosing medical alert devices

“Help, I’ve fallen and . . .” Well, you know the rest of the phrase; you’ve undoubtedly heard it many times. Is the message real or just another promotion to strike fear in the minds of seniors to sell another unreliable gimmick?

Amy Lock, owner and agency director of Companion and Home Care, LLC, met with town residents at the April Age-Friendly forum to say no, it’s real and we must take the issue of falling seriously. Ms. Lock came to our forum armed with facts, figures and real-life stories to help attendees understand the importance of protecting themselves against the adverse effects of falls, which can be life altering.

The statistics Ms. Lock shared are supported by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). More than one out of four elderly persons falls each year, and falling once doubles a person’s chances of falling again. Of the approximately three million seniors who fall annually and are treated in emergency facilities, 800,000 are hospitalized with head injuries as severe as traumatic brain injuries (TBI) or hip fractures. Death rates related to falls increased 30% for seniors between 2007 and 2016.

What conditions may contribute to a senior’s vulnerability to falling? Research has identified several risk factors, including lower body weakness, vitamin D deficiency, difficulties with walking and balance, sleep deprived nights, vision and hearing problems, foot pain, and inappropriate footwear. Home hazards, such as throw rugs and clutter on the floor, can trip up a person, and as you get older, it is harder to catch yourself in that situation. Use of medicines, such as tranquilizers, sedatives, antidepressants and some over-the-counter medications, can also affect balance. Ms. Lock noted that most falls are caused by a combination of risk factors, and the more risk factors a senior has, the greater their chance of falling. Health providers can help to cut down on the risk of falling by reducing the number of risk factors.

However, even if you reduced your risk factors to zero, accidents happen. We don’t choose the time or place we’re going to fall, so what is something else we could do to protect ourselves from the potentially life-threatening impact of falling? That is what Ms. Lock wanted attendees to know about—how to choose a medical alert device that will notify our family and emergency management teams of a dire predicament in which we may find ourselves. You may have noticed that many choices are currently being marketed. So, how do you decide what is best for you?

As we have heard so often in prior forums, not everything you hear may be true, and we must be cautious not to fall for ads and commercials making grand promises or not fully disclosing pertinent details. Attendees were fortunate to hear from someone who has done our homework for us. Ms. Lock brought her 94-year-old father with her to the forum. She shared the experience he had with three strokes and what she learned while exploring what he needed to remain safe in the future.

With medical alert devices, there is no one size fits all. There are basically two types, in-home and mobile—the in-home connects to a landline and the mobile to your mobile device. Most medical alerts function with a base station that contains your personal contact information, an emergency button worn as a pendant or wrist band and a 24/7 monitoring carrier. When a person activates the button, it signals the base station that the wearer has experienced an emergency, and the base station transmits the contact information to a medical professional. There are more-advanced medical alert systems, such as the one Ms. Lock’s father has, which includes a feature to detect a fall (for the times the user is incapable of pressing a button), GPS and a built-in two-way communication system.

In-home medical alert systems have a limited range since the hook-up is through a landline and more likely to be used by seniors who are homebound. A mobile system has a GPS locator, which is the best option for an older person with an

active lifestyle (OPAL) who enjoys the freedom to go wherever and whenever the mood dictates.

There is much on the internet discussing the subject of medical alert devices. From the top 10 list nationally, Ms. Lock chose Greatcall Lively because it had the features her father needed. She particularly liked the GPS, the fall detection and two-way communication features. She also liked that the company didn’t require a contract and charged no cancellation fees. She said they provided great customer service, which is always a treat.

Ms. Lock gave attendees tips on how and where to start their own personal journey into the world of medical alert devices. A good place to start is your health care professional to determine what your physical needs and limitations are. Armed with that feedback, a list of questions to ask while interviewing the various companies would include:

- Is a contract required? The best companies don’t require a contract nor have a cancellation fee should the device not perform as intended.
- Does the system have fall detection, two-way communication, GPS and a medication reminder?
- What is the battery life, and is the device waterproof? (a critical feature)
- Who is the service provider, and is it bundled with other devices?
- What is the cost, being fully aware that the more features the higher the cost? Since this device will be a lifeline to those you love, Ms. Lock felt cost should be irrelevant if the device does what it’s supposed to do.
- Does the device come with a lifetime warranty?

Ms. Lock made an interesting comment that caught our attention. When interviewing companies, she has found that talking to tech support is of more value than talking to the sales side of a company. The sales people obviously want to sell, while the tech people know how things work and will discuss any elements that may impact a senior’s uncomplicated use.

Ms. Lock’s presentation may have changed the minds of a few of the younger OPALS in attendance, the “who, me?” crowd still in denial of certain aspects of the aging process. Falls are a fact of life and can happen to anyone. It’s just when you’re past a certain age, you don’t bounce back as you did when you were a young 40-something, your balance may be a bit off, your bones may be more fragile, you may live alone, and your risk factors have multiplied, especially if you have altered your daily activities due to a fear of falling. There are three books dealing with aging that Ms. Lock encouraged attendees to read: *Being Mortal*, *Aging Our Way* and *A Bittersweet Season*.

There are so many things you can and should do to prevent a fall. But aside from that, a tragedy can be averted when you wear a medical alert device. Do it for yourself; do it for your loved ones.

The Age-Friendly Advisory Committee is grateful for the speakers who have given generously of their time and talent to bring topics of interest and critical importance to our citizens and for the many OPALS who continue to support our forums through their attendance. The June 20 Third Thursday Forum at Four will address annual wellness visits for seniors, Medicare-mandated dementia tests and more. Pencil that date on your calendar, and as with past forums, you’ll have an opportunity to ask questions and walk away more knowledgeable than when you walked in.

Suggestions for future forums may be submitted to Sarah Williams at town hall at [SWilliams@townofpks.com](mailto:SWilliams@townofpks.com), by calling 247-4353, ext. 13, or by coming to our next third Thursday advisory meeting on June 20 at 2 p.m. As always, we are searching for topics of interest to our citizens for future forums and welcome your suggestions as we all continue growing healthier, smarter and more informed together.

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