

FDA warning: Emergency call buttons on pendants may choke wearers

Thousands of seniors who live alone rely on the safety monitor

Thousands of South Florida seniors turn to monitored personal emergency response systems -- made famous by the "I've fallen and I can't get up" commercials -- to feel secure if they have health problems and are living alone.

But federal regulators are advising seniors to talk to their families and doctors about whether their system is safe for them, following reports of injuries and even a few rare deaths caused by some types of emergency call buttons that are worn on pendants.

The Food and Drug Administration has issued a safety alert for the Philips Lifeline Personal Help Button, used by 750,000 people in the United States and Canada. The move was sparked by six reports of serious injuries, including four deaths, from people choking when their Lifeline pendant cords became entangled with other objects.

Philips Healthcare and the FDA would not release details about the incidents, which happened between 1998 and 2009.

FDA officials said the greatest strangulation risk was for seniors or the disabled who are in wheelchairs or beds with guard rails, or who use walkers. They advised these users, and their families, to ask their health-care providers if they should use any pendant-style buttons or if they should go with another style, such as one worn on the wrist.

The injuries raise the question: Should emergency response pendant cords be made to break away?

[Steve Kelly](#), spokesman for Philips Healthcare, said the company had discussed break-away cords in the past. "But our concern was that if the cord tore away, the pendant then would just bounce out of the subscriber's reach," he said.

All of Lifeline's 750,000 customers have been sent letters about the hazard, Kelly said; the company would not say how many were Floridians. The product's labeling now includes a choking warning but federal regulators are not asking for breakaway cords.

That didn't deter Life Alert, the California-based company that coined the "I've fallen and I can't get up" slogan, from switching years ago to cords that pop apart under tension, said Vice President John Brady. Choking hazards "always were a concern, as you come to understand your customer is someone who tends to fall, maybe near beds or furniture," he said.

Brady said Life Alert is the second largest emergency response system network in the country, after Lifeline.

Dr. William Mann, chairman of the [University of Florida](#)'s occupational therapy department, said he had not heard of emergency pendants choking their wearers. "I think a bigger problem is that people die because they weren't wearing their pendant," he said.

Another issue, Mann said, is that the devices primarily are designed to help people when they fall. "And often, when you fall, you aren't in a position to push the button because you are unconscious," he said.

Personal emergency response systems, or PERS, have become increasingly popular as the population ages and now are offered by multiple manufacturers. The systems have an emergency call button that alerts a staffed monitoring center that can contact paramedics or police, and a console connected to the user's telephone.

Consumers usually pay an installation fee and a monthly monitoring fee; the call buttons can be purchased, leased or rented. Prices vary widely, according to the Federal Trade Commission. Some manufacturers, including Philips, distribute the products through community hospitals, home health agencies or government programs but do the monitoring.

Associations whose members work with frail elders, including the National Center of Assisted Living and the National Association for Home Care and Hospice, said they had not heard about the FDA choking hazard alert when contacted by the *Sun Sentinel*.

"The problem usually is trying to keep the device on them, especially if they have some sort of dementia," said Pat Lange, executive director of the [Florida](#) Assisted Living Affiliation.

An emerging product, which Mann calls home behavioral activity monitoring systems, circumvents some of the problems posed by emergency button systems. Sensors are placed throughout the house that can track a person's movements, and notify monitors if the user hasn't come back out of the bathroom or gotten out of bed.

"There's no need to push a button or wear anything," Mann said.

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