

Support system for seniors:

Sensors marketed as new answer to worries about frail parents

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By **BOB MOOS / The Dallas Morning News**

Virginia Murley lives alone in Mesquite and likes it that way, but her family worried that she would fall and hurt herself because of her poor eyesight. When Theresa Teel of Sunnyvale called to check on her 81-year-old mother every morning, she never knew what to expect. JOHN F. RHODES/DMN

"I'd take a deep breath and pray she answered," Mrs. Teel said.

Now she knows whether her mother has slept well, gotten out of bed, fixed breakfast and taken her medication. Mrs. Teel's peace of mind comes from a new home-monitoring system that uses motion sensors to record an older adult's daily activities and, once it determines the person's habits, reports anything unusual.

The "Quiet Care" system, developed by Living Independently Group Inc. and sold to families by ADT Security Services Inc., is one of the first futuristic products being designed to help boomers care for frail parents.

"Seniors want to grow old at home, where their memories are," said Scott Gurley, group director for ADT's home health services. "Quiet Care prolongs their independence while giving caregivers confidence that things are under control."

Experts say the market for "gerontechnology" products is enormous -- 11 million seniors who live by themselves and 22 million adult children who often feel overwhelmed by caregiving responsibilities.

Those numbers are prompting corporate heavyweights like General Electric Co., Hewlett-Packard Co., Honeywell International Inc. and Intel Corp. to work on other monitoring systems to help older adults remain at home.

"We're reinventing our care of older people," said Russell Bodoff, executive director of the Center for Aging Services Technologies, a consortium of technology companies, university labs and aging organizations.

Longevity revolution:

The nation is in the midst of a longevity revolution. The 65-plus population will more than double in the next quarter century, growing to 71 million, and account for one in five Americans by 2030.

"We won't be able to build enough nursing homes," Mr. Bodoff said. "We have to find less-costly alternatives."

Quiet Care is the first home-monitoring system of its kind to hit the consumer market. Living Independently began selling the system to institutions a year ago, and ADT has just started marketing it to households.

Experts say the technology is more sophisticated than personal emergency call buttons that have been available for years.

"Many seniors don't wear their buttons or, if they do, don't use them in emergencies," said Robert Roush, director of the Texas Consortium of Geriatric Centers and an associate professor at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

ADT's system includes five small, wireless sensors located throughout a house or apartment -- near a senior's bed, in a bathroom, by a stove or refrigerator, inside a medicine drawer and in the living room.

Each sensor sends data 24/7 to a book-sized base unit somewhere in the home -- Mrs. Teel's mother keeps hers in a TV cabinet.

That information is relayed by phone line to a monitoring center where it's analyzed. The system costs \$299 to install and \$89.95 per month to maintain.

Mr. Gurley of ADT says the price compares favorably with a visiting nurse, who may charge \$18 an hour, or a nursing home, which costs an average of \$156 a day.

Medicare may also reimburse seniors for part of the cost of home monitoring someday, predicts Thomas Fairchild, director of special projects on aging at the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth.

"If this technology can be shown to save health care dollars over the long term, the government may be willing to help defray its expense," he said.

Providing alerts:

If the monitors detect a problem, ADT alerts Mrs. Teel and other family members by e-mail or phone.

Caregivers can also log onto a password-protected Web site to find out such things as whether their parent got out of bed or took her medicine.

Mrs. Teel woke up one morning to read a message that the temperature in her mother's apartment had dropped to 63, too cold for older adults. Her mother had tried to adjust the thermostat the night before.

Her mother says she doesn't notice the sensors and doesn't mind the monitoring. "It gives me a sense of security, knowing my family is looking out for me," Mrs. Murley said.

Dr. Roush, a paid consultant for Living Independently, says Quiet Care is better suited for some seniors than others. "Not everyone will want or need monitoring," he said. "But those who are prone to falling, or have a chronic medical problem, will benefit. In an emergency, someone found quickly will have a far better chance of survival."

Geriatric care managers, who help families arrange the care of older adults, are still learning about the home-monitoring systems. Some predict that "high-tech" products will complement their "high-touch" services. "I'll be able to take the data, interpret it for my clients and then respond to it," said Steven Barlam, a former president of the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers.

Doubts:

Others are skeptical. "I suspect seniors will feel spied upon and resent it," said Kay Paggi, a geriatric care manager in Richardson.

Quiet Care's marketers say most seniors will agree to trade away some of their privacy if it allows them to stay in their homes. ADT says it's making its sales pitch to caregiving boomers.

"That usually means the eldest daughter, who's between 45 and 60," Mr. Gurley said. Home-monitoring systems will have particular appeal to long-distance caregivers who can't just drop by and check on their parents, says Gail Gibson Hunt, director of the National Alliance for Caregiving.

Experts expect elder-care products to get more sophisticated.

Living Independently is teaming up with iMetrikus Inc. to sell a home-monitoring system that also measures seniors' blood sugar, blood pressure and lung function.

Intel has been exploring how to help people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease prolong their independence -- one idea is to install home video screens that prompt them to eat, drink and take their medicine as prescribed.

The Center for Aging Services Technologies has advocated creating public-private partnerships to figure out other ways to check on seniors, respond to emergencies and help caregivers avoid burnout.

"We want the government to name a high-level national commission that would look at how technology can move more senior care into the home," said Mr. Bodoff, the center's director. "This initiative could save society billions."

He says his consortium's proposal so far has fallen on deaf ears in Washington but will be presented again at the White House Conference on Aging this fall.

Meanwhile, families like the Teels don't know what they'd do without elder-care products. "If it weren't for our home-monitoring system, my mother would be in an assisted-living center," Mrs. Teel said. "It's a blessing."

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