A San Francisco company is trying to make it easier for family members to keep tabs on their elderly loved ones without being too intrusive.

Lively produces sensors that track the movements of their elderly customers' homes and automatically notifies family members if things are amiss. The sensors can be placed on cupboards, pillboxes, doors and more to deliver a comprehensive awareness of activity, without invading privacy or imposing the burden of wearing anything. Its built-in cellular service means no Internet access or phone line is required; family members receive alerts and reminders by e-mail and text.

The device blends into the background for Lively customer Patrick Guerra's 87-year-old mother, Ida. Both say they barely notice the Lively sensors that have been in place for months. Its simple structure is a huge advantage for Ida who didn't want to use her cell phone because she found it too cumbersome to operate.

"There was no hesitancy at all," she said of using the Lively sensors. "My son said it would help him oversee my well-being, and that is good. All I do is go about my regular activities and it provides information to my son's computer. I do not have to do anything else."

"The fact that the device is simple enough to just plug into an outlet without Wi-Fi needed makes sense for older Americans," said David Glickman, chief operating officer of Lively.

Lack of access

Only 62 percent of Americans over the age of 65 report having a computer at home, and only 45 percent have Internet access, according to a May study by the U.S. Census Bureau. One of Lively’s selling points is that it doesn't rely on broadband.

ABI Research's 2012 study predicted that the market for monitoring devices for seniors is expected to grow to more than 36 million units in 2017, up from under 3 million in 2011.

Jonathan Collins, principal analyst at ABI Research and author of the 2012 report, said more family members and caregivers want to buy cloud-based systems to extend relatives' care. The lower cost of network connections and adoption of wearable sensors has contributed to this growth, along with an aging population that wants to remain independent, he said.

'Feeling loved'

Laura Carstensen, a founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, serves on Lively's board. She said new technologies that offer remote monitoring are hitting the market every day, but most of these systems are overkill. For example, devices that take video footage of a senior can feel intrusive.

"It's not just about feeling safe, it's about feeling loved," she said. "Most people don't want or need to have their blood pressures monitored every time they sit down or urine analyzed on a regular basis. Lively offers a light touch system that uses cutting-edge technologies to provide just enough information to loved ones to let people know that everything is normal."

"Good technology is not just tech for tech's sake," said Glickman, who founded Lively in 2012 with Iggy Fanlo and Keith Dutton. "There's a 'surprise and delight' factor, without any tech infrastructure knowledge needed by elders."

Glickman, whose father uses the device, recounted a time when he received a notification that his father hadn't taken his medication, so he called to find out if everything was OK.

"What he realized, after looking at the dashboard, is that he did take his medication - at 1:30 a.m.," he said. "Ever since, he's been much
more cognizant of his own sleeping patterns and gets to bed now much closer to 11 p.m."

Clara Berridge, a doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley’s School of Social Welfare whose dissertation is on home sensors, said Lively - and other products like it - face some challenges. For example, she said, it could cause family members to worry more or become hyper vigilant, despite the product’s intention to provide peace of mind.

**False alerts?**

"For instance, should they get notice of unusual activity but are unable to get in touch with their family member right away," she wrote in an e-mail. "There is the likelihood of 'false alerts.'"

While Lively hopes to keep family members updated by using the sensors, they also want to help them feel connected through their app, LivelyGram, which allows family members to upload photos. Twice a month, the company compiles up to eight of the photos, prints them and mails them to senior customers.

A 2010 article by psychologists at Brigham Young University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that social connection leads to a 50 percent increased chance of longevity. A 2013 study by University College London found that social isolation was associated with increased mortality.

Guerra said he initially didn’t think LivelyGram was an essential component of the service, but it turned out to be a lot more beneficial for him and his mother than he thought it would.

"The subtle thing about older folks is they can focus on things very narrowly like their next meal," he said. "It’s much more enjoyable to talk about our vacation, so she can share in that, since she has physical limitations to traveling. It (LivelyGram) is able to engage her."

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