

Android's emergency call shortcut is flooding dispatchers with false calls



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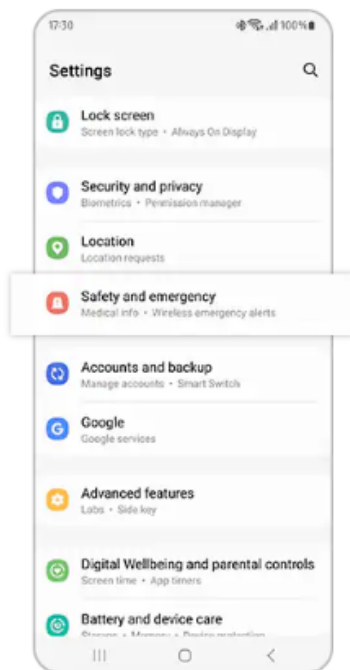
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Police forces in the UK are seeing a “record number” of false calls to 999, the UK’s emergency services number, and the culprit is apparently Android. As the BBC reports, Android 12 added an easy-access feature for emergency services: just press the power button five times, and your phone will dial emergency services for you. That’s apparently pretty easy to do accidentally when a phone is sitting in your pocket, or if you have a wonky power button, resulting in a surge of totally silent accidental calls to emergency dispatch.

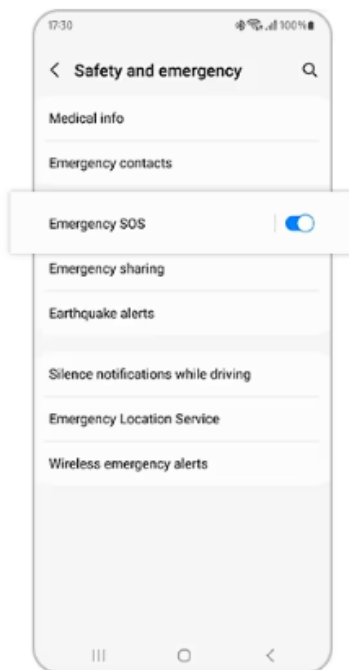
The National Police Chiefs Council tweeted earlier this month that “Nationally, all emergency services are currently experiencing record high 999 call volumes. There’s a few reasons for this, but one we think is having a significant impact is an update to Android smartphones.” The BBC report says one department “received 169 silent 999 calls between 00:00 and 19:00 BST on Sunday alone.” In response to these most recent complaints, Google says it’s working on a fix with Android OEMs.

The funny thing is, Android 12—and this easy emergency call feature—came out a year and a half ago. Thanks to the *unique* (uniquely bad) way that Android is rolled out, the feature is only now hitting enough people to become a national problem. Google’s Pixel devices get new Android updates immediately, but everyone else can take months or years to get new versions of Android because it’s up to your device manufacturer to make new, bespoke Android builds for every device they have ever released. When this landed on Pixel devices in 2021, it was immediately flagged as a problem by some people, with one Reddit post calling it “dangerous.” Since then, there has been a steady stream of posts warning people about it.

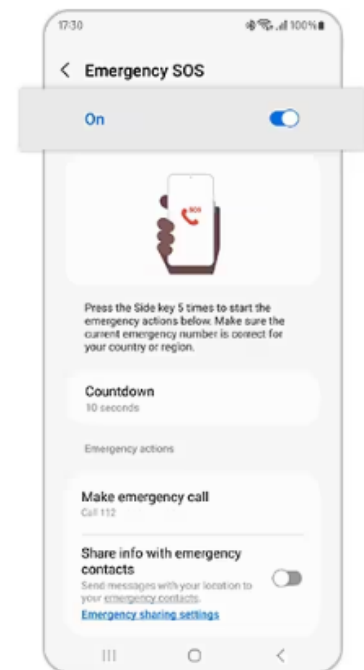
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Step 2. Tap “Safety and emergency” in settings.



Step 3. Tap “Emergency SOS”.



Step 4. Tap the **switch button** to turn Emergency SOS on or off.

Samsung shows off how to disable emergency SOS, but Samsung phones apparently don't have the “On/Off” switch at the top. Until a patch comes out, Google's current recommendation is to turn the feature off. That's easier said than done. Many Android manufacturers like to scramble the settings, making online tutorials difficult, so your best bet might be to just search the system settings for “Emergency SOS.” On Samsung and Pixel phones, there should be a top-level “Safety & Emergency” page in the system settings that will get you to the “emergency SOS” settings. While Samsung has a settings page for the feature, some users report the page doesn't actually have an “off” switch. Some builds for the Galaxy S23 and S22 let you control things, like if emergency SOS should play a warning sound, but you can't actually turn off the power button shortcut.

Like everything with Android, Google told the BBC it's up to manufacturers to decide how and when the emergency SOS feature works, even though Google is the one that developed it. The company says: “To help these manufacturers prevent unintentional emergency calls on their devices, Android is

providing them with additional guidance and resources. We anticipate device manufacturers will roll out updates to their users that address this issue shortly. Users that continue to experience this issue should switch Emergency SOS off for the next couple of days.” When Android patches can take months or years to reach the masses, Google’s claim that this will be fixed in “a couple of days” sounds... optimistic?

This isn’t the first time easy-access emergency call features have burdened local call centers. The Apple Watch launched with a feature for automatic emergency calls when the watch detected too many G-forces, and in the US, that resulted in 911 being “inundated” with false distress calls from people skiing or on roller coasters. When Google shipped a similar feature on the Pixel Watch earlier this year, the company talked up how much work it put into stopping accidental calls, but it doesn’t sound like the Android phone feature received the same amount of scrutiny. That’s still better than crashing every time you call 911, at least.

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