

# Older Driver Safety

## Warning Signs and Knowing When to Stop



As we age, it's normal for our driving abilities to change. By reducing risk factors and incorporating safe driving practices, many of us can continue driving safely long into our senior years. But we do have to pay attention to any warning signs that age is interfering with our driving safety and make appropriate adjustments. Even if you find that you need to reduce your driving or give up the keys, it doesn't mean the end of your independence. Seeking alternative methods of transportation can offer health and social benefits, as well as a welcome change of pace to life.

### Older drivers tip #1: Understand how aging affects driving

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Everyone ages differently, so there is no arbitrary cutoff as to when someone should stop driving. However, older adults are more likely to receive traffic citations and get into accidents than younger drivers. In fact, fatal crash rates rise sharply after a driver has reached the age of 70. What causes this increase? As we age, factors such as decreased vision, impaired hearing, or slowed motor reflexes may become a problem. You may have a chronic condition that gradually worsens with time, or you may have to adjust to a sudden change, such as a stroke.

Aging tends to result in a reduction of strength, coordination, and flexibility, which can have a major impact on your ability to safely control a car. For example:

- Pain or stiffness in your neck can make it harder to look over your shoulder to change lanes or look left and right at intersections to check for other traffic or pedestrians.
- Leg pain can make it difficult to move your foot from the gas to the brake pedal.
- Diminished arm strength can make it hard to turn the steering wheel quickly and effectively.
- As reaction times also slow down with age, you may be slower to spot vehicles emerging from side streets and driveways, or to realize that the vehicle ahead of you has slowed or stopped.
- Keeping track of so many road signs, signals, and markings, as well as all the other traffic and pedestrians, can also become more difficult as you lose the ability to effectively divide your attention between multiple activities.

You may have driven your entire life and take great pride in your safety record, but as you age, it is critical that you realize your driving ability can change. To continue driving safely, you need to

recognize that changes can happen, get help when they do, and be willing to listen if others voice concerns.

## Older drivers tip #2: Tips for safe senior driving

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Aging does **not** automatically equal total loss of driving ability. There are many things you can do to continue driving safely, including modifying your car, the way you drive, and understanding and rectifying physical issues that may interfere with driving.

### Take charge of your health

Regular check-ups are critical to keep you in the best possible driving shape. Other steps you can take include:

- **Getting your eyes checked every year.** Make sure that corrective lenses are current. Keep the windshield, mirrors, and headlights clean, and turn brightness up on the instrument panel on your dashboard.
- **Having your hearing checked annually.** If hearing aids are prescribed, make sure they are worn while driving. Be careful when opening car windows, though, as drafts can sometimes impair a hearing aid's effectiveness.
- **Talking with a doctor** about the effects that ailments or medications may have on your driving ability. For example, if you have glaucoma, you may find tinted eyeglass lenses useful in reducing glare.
- **Sleeping well.** Getting enough sleep is essential to driving well. If there are problems, try to improve nighttime sleep conditions and talk with your doctor about the effect of any sleep medications on driving.

### Find the right car and any aids you need for safe driving

Choose a vehicle with automatic transmission, power steering, and power brakes. Keep your car in good working condition by visiting your mechanic for scheduled maintenance. Be sure that windows and headlights are always clean. An occupational therapist or a certified driving rehabilitation specialist, for example, can prescribe equipment to make it easier to steer the car and to operate the foot pedals.

### Drive defensively

In these days of cell phones, GPS devices, and digital music players, drivers are even more distracted than they used to be. This means you'll want to take extra steps to drive safely, like leaving adequate space for the car in front of you, paying extra attention at intersections, and making sure you are driving appropriate to the flow of traffic. Avoid distractions such as talking on the phone while driving or trying to puzzle out a map, even if it's a GPS on the car; pull over instead.

Make sure you allow sufficient braking distance. Remember, if you double your speed—say from 30mph to 60mph—your braking distance does not become twice as long, it becomes *four times* as far, even more if the road is wet or icy.

## Know your limitations

If a driving situation makes you uncomfortable, don't do it. Many older drivers voluntarily begin to make changes in their driving practices. For instance, you may decide to drive only during daylight hours if you have trouble seeing well in reduced light. If fast-moving traffic bothers you, consider staying off freeways, highways, and find street routes instead. You may also decide to avoid driving in bad weather (rain, thunderstorms, snow, hail, ice). If you are going to a place that is unfamiliar to you, it is a good idea to plan your route before you leave so that you feel more confident and avoid getting lost.

## Listen to the concerns of others

If relatives, friends, or others begin to talk to you about your driving, it may be time to take a hard, honest look at your driving ability:

- A number of self-evaluation tools are available to help. See listings in the Resources section below.
- You might choose to brush up on your driving through a refresher course. Safety courses are offered in many communities and online.
- Talk to your doctor. Your doctor should also be able to provide an opinion about your ability to drive safely, or refer you to a specialist for more intensive evaluation.

## Getting a professional evaluation

An occupational therapist or certified driver rehabilitation specialist can provide a comprehensive evaluation of the skills needed to drive and recommend car modifications or tools to keep someone driving as long as possible. It can also help diffuse accusations from family by providing a neutral third party perspective. You can ask your medical treatment team for a referral, or visit the websites listed in the Resources section below.

## Older drivers tip #3: Know the warning signs of unsafe driving

Sometimes unsafe signs can come up gradually, or a recent change in health may make problems worse. Even if the individual warning signs seem minor, together they can add up to a substantial risk. If you are concerned about your own driving or worried about a friend or loved one, keep an eye out for these warning signs:

## Issues with health

Health problems don't always mean that driving needs to be stopped, but they do require extra vigilance, awareness, and willingness to correct them. Some health problems include:

- **Conflicting medications.** Certain medications or combinations of medications can affect senses and reflexes. Always check the label on medications and double check with your healthcare team if you are taking several medications or notice a difference after starting a new medication.
- **Eyesight problems.** Some eye conditions or medications can interfere with your ability to focus your peripheral vision, or cause you to experience extra sensitivity to light, trouble seeing

in the dark, or blurred vision. Can you easily see traffic lights and street signs? Or do you find yourself driving closer and closer to them, slowing by just to see the lights or signs? Can you react appropriately to drivers coming from behind or the side?

- **Hearing problems.** If your hearing is decreasing, you may not realize you're missing out on important cues to drive safely. Can you hear emergency sirens, or if someone is accelerating next to you, or the honking of a horn?
- **Problems with reflexes and range of motion.** Can you react quickly enough if you need to brake suddenly or quickly look back? Have you confused the gas and brake pedals? Do you find yourself getting more flustered while driving, or quick to anger? Is it comfortable to look back over your shoulder, or does it take extra effort?
- **Problems with memory.** Do you find yourself missing exits that used to be second nature, or find yourself getting lost frequently? While everyone has an occasional lapse, if there's an increasing pattern, it's time to get evaluated by a doctor.

### Issues on the road

- **Trouble with the nuts and bolts of driving.** Do you see yourself making sudden lane changes, drifting into other lanes, braking, or accelerating suddenly without reason? How about failing to use the turn signal, or keeping the signal on without changing lanes?
- **Close calls and increased citations.** Red flags include frequent "close calls" (i.e., almost crashing), dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, and curbs. Increased traffic tickets or "warnings" by traffic or law enforcement officers are also red flags.

### Older drivers tip #4: Benefits of not driving

Adjusting to life without a car may be challenging at first; most likely, you've been driving your whole life and it feels like quite a shock. It's normal to be frustrated, angry, or irritable. You might even feel ashamed or worry that you are losing your independence. However, it takes a lot of courage to stop driving and put the safety of yourself and others first. You may also find there are many benefits to living without a car that you may not have considered. For example, you may:

- **Save money on the cost of car ownership,** including car insurance, maintenance, registration, and gasoline. These savings can pay for alternative transportation if necessary. In fact, many seniors who only used their car for short trips often find that using a taxi or shuttle service for those same trips works out costing far less.
- **Improve your health.** Giving up the car keys often means walking or cycling more, which can have a hugely beneficial effect on your health. [Regular exercise from walking and cycling](#) can help seniors boost their energy, sleep better, and improve confidence. It can also help you

manage the symptoms of illness and pain, maintain your independence, and even reverse some of the signs of aging. And not only is exercise good for your body—it's good for your mind, mood, and memory.

- **Expand your social circle.** While many seniors have difficulty accepting ride offers from others, this can be a good time to reach out and [connect to new people](#). Find a way of accepting rides that makes you comfortable. For example, you can offer a friend money for gas, or trade off on other chores, such as cooking a meal in return for your friend driving.
- **Appreciate the change of pace.** For many, stopping driving means slowing down. While that may not sound appealing to everyone, many older adults find that they actually enjoy life far more when they live it at a slower pace. It can also have a beneficial effect on mental health by placing less stress on your nervous system.

### Know your transportation alternatives

The more alternatives you have to driving, the easier the adjustment will be. You want to make sure that you can get out not only for essentials like doctor's appointments, but also social visits and enrichment. Feeling housebound can quickly lead to depression.

This may also be a time to evaluate your living arrangements. If you are isolated and there are little transportation options in your area, you may want to consider moving to an area with more options, or investigate senior living options.

- **Public transportation.** If you live in an area that is well connected with public transportation, it can be a very handy way to get around. Check your local public transportation options and ask about reduced prices for older adults.
- **Ride sharing.** Family members, friends, and neighbors may be a resource for ride sharing. Offer to share the costs or to return the favor in a different way, such as cooking a meal or helping with yard work.
- **Community shuttles/senior transit.** Your local community may have shuttle service available, especially for medical appointments. Some medical facilities, such as those for veterans, also have transportation options for medical appointments. Your local place of worship may also offer transit options.
- **Taxis or private drivers.** Taxis may be a good option for quick trips without a lot of prior scheduling. You can also look into hiring a chauffeur or private driver. You can go through a formalized driving service, or sometimes a family member, friend, or neighbor can help. You do want to make sure whoever is driving has a good driving record and is responsible.
- **Walking/cycling.** If health permits, walking or cycling when you can is a great way to not only get around but also get some exercise. Regular physical activity lowers your risk for a

variety of conditions, including Alzheimer's and dementia, heart disease, diabetes, colon cancer, high blood pressure, and obesity.

- **Motorized wheelchairs.** Motorized wheelchairs can be a good way to get around if you live in an area with easily accessible stores and well-paved streets.

For ways to find transportation alternatives in your area, see the Resources section below.

## How to talk to a loved one about driving concerns

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Driver safety can often be a sensitive issue for older drivers. A driver's license signifies more than the ability to drive a car; it is a symbol of freedom and self-sufficiency. Understandably, driving is not a privilege that anyone wants to relinquish willingly. Still, safety must come first.

Some older drivers may be aware of their faltering ability but still be reluctant to give up driving completely. Another person's concerns may force the senior driver to act. They may even feel relieved to have someone else help make the decision to stop driving. Some seniors may forget that they aren't supposed to drive. If that is the case, it is even more important to remove the car or the keys to make it impossible to drive. If you find yourself in the position of talking to an older friend or family member about their driving, remember the following:

- **Be respectful.** For many seniors, driving is an integral part of independence. Many older adults have fond memories of getting a driver's license. At the same time, don't be intimidated or back down if you have a true concern.
- **Give specific examples.** It's easier to tune out generalizations like "You just can't drive safely anymore." Outline concerns that you have noticed, such as "You have a harder time turning your head than you used to," or "You braked suddenly at stop signs three times the last time we drove."
- **Find strength in numbers.** If more than one family member or close friend has noticed, it's less likely to be taken as nagging. A loved one may also listen to a more impartial party, such as a doctor or driving specialist.
- **Help find alternatives.** The person may be so used to driving that they have never considered alternatives. You can offer concrete help, such as researching transportation options or offering rides when possible. If your family member is reluctant to ask for help, it can lead to isolation and depression.
- **Understand the difficulty of the transition.** Your loved one may experience a profound sense of loss having given up driving. Don't dismiss their feelings but try to help with the transition as much as possible. If it is safe, try slowly transitioning the senior out of driving to give them time to adjust. For example, your loved one may begin the transition by no longer driving at night or on the freeways, or by using a shuttle service to specific appointments, such as the doctor's.

## When an older driver refuses to give up the keys

Sometimes an older driver has to be stopped from driving over their objections. It might feel very difficult for you to make this call, especially if the senior is a parent or other close figure used to having their independence. **However, their safety and the safety of others must come first. An unsafe driver can seriously injure or kill themselves or others.**

If appropriate evaluations and recommendations have been made, and no amount of rational discussion has convinced the driver to hand over the car keys, then you may make an anonymous report to your state's Department of Motor Vehicles (in the U.S. or Canada) or talk to the person's physician about your concerns. In some cases, there is a need to take further actions such as taking away the car keys, selling or disabling the car, and enlisting the local police to explain the importance of safe driving and the legal implications of unsafe driving.

In the UK, report an unsafe driver to the DVLA. In Australia, contact your state/territory's licensing authority (see Resources section for applicable links).

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