

Senior Driving

Safety Tips, Warning Signs, and Knowing When to Stop

taken from the web site helpguide.org Nov 09



Driver safety is an important and often sensitive issue for seniors. The changes of normal aging can sometimes interfere with the ability to drive. Learn to reduce these risk factors. Drive safely longer by taking care of your health and incorporating safe driving practices. However, safety must come first. If you need to reduce your driving or eventually give up the keys, it doesn't mean the end of your independence. With help from family, friends, community resources, a positive outlook, and personal action, you can remain mobile without driving.

Facts about driving and aging

Everyone ages differently, so some people can continue to drive into their seventies, eighties, and even beyond while others cannot or should not. However, the statistics on older adults and driving can be sobering.

Older adults and accidents

Statistics show that the elderly are more likely than other drivers to receive traffic citations for failing to yield, turning improperly, and running red lights and stop signs—all indications of decreased driving ability. It is a fact that older adults are at higher risk for road accidents than other age groups. Older drivers are more likely to get into multiple-vehicle accidents than younger people do, and the accidents are more dangerous for them than for younger drivers. A person 65 or older who is involved in a car accident is more likely to be seriously hurt, more likely to require hospitalization, and more likely to die than younger people involved in the same crash. Truth is, fatal crash rates rise sharply after a driver has reached the age of 70.

Environmental factors

There are environmental factors as well. These affect people of all ages and include signs and road markings that are difficult to see or read, complex and confusing intersections, older vehicles that lack automatic safety features, and newer dashboard instrument panels

with multiple displays. Such factors are often amplified in those seniors who experience a decline in their ability to drive, and become very risky. For all of these reasons, you want to stay alert to your own driving experiences and be willing to admit and discuss any difficulties and concerns with a relative or someone else you trust.

Lessening aging risk factors that affect safe driving

It is easy to overlook problems that develop slowly over time because we typically accommodate our daily activities to what we can comfortably do. Consequently, issues like vision or hearing loss, decreasing physical activity, growing forgetfulness, or the impact of prescription and over-the-counter drugs are hardly noticed. Any one or a combination of these conditions can make driving hazardous.

Decrease risks by taking control of your health

The most important and positive action you can take is to decrease the driving risks associated with aging. Do not wait until problems become serious. Tending to your health and well-being on a regular basis can help in your efforts to stay independent and mobile. The most common risk factors related to safe driving are listed below along with suggested steps you can take:

Helping yourself drive safely

If you're worried about... Try the following...

Visual decline

Get eyes checked every year and 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.

Hearing loss

Have hearing checked annually. If hearing aids are prescribed, make sure they are worn while driving

Limited mobility and increased reaction time

An occupational therapist or a certified driving rehabilitation specialist can prescribe equipment to make it easier to steer the car and to operate the foot pedals.

Medications

Talk with a doctor about the effects of medications you are taking on driving ability.

Drowsiness

Sleeping well is essential to driving well. If there are problems, try to improve nighttime sleep conditions and talk with a doctor about the effect of any sleep medications on driving.

Dementia and brain impairment

If there are any signs of dementia or brain impairment, limit driving and consult a doctor.

Driver Safety Tips

Aside from taking care of your health, you can take an active role in helping yourself or another senior to drive more safely.

- **Find the right car and any aids you need for 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. You can also see an occupational therapist for special driving aids that can help with physical problems.

- **Take it slow and give yourself plenty of room.** If cars are passing you on both the right and left lanes, you may be driving more slowly than you used to. Move into the slow lane so others can pass you safely. Also, to avoid problems if the vehicle in front of you stops suddenly, stay back about two car lengths. Be sure to yield the right of way in intersections. Older drivers also have a large number of accidents at intersections when making left turns. It is best to avoid them altogether by making successive right turns and keeping going around the block or blocks to get to your destination.
- **Avoid distractions.** In general, many accidents happen because of distractions like talking on the phone, tuning the radio, eating or drinking, reaching for something, turning your head to talk with a passenger or looking around at the scenery instead of the road. Even a few seconds of taking your mind off driving can be precarious.
- **Avoid uncomfortable driving situations.** 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. Online services such as [MapQuest](#), [Google Maps](#), and [Yahoo Maps](#) can be very helpful.

Warning signs of unsafe driving

Driving is a complex function and problems can come up in a number of ways. If you begin to find driving more difficult than before, be alert for changes that make driving unsafe. If you notice any of the warning signs listed below, it is time to reassess your risks. If you are in a position to observe these in another driver, see if any of them are reflected in your own driving. It's hard to do but extremely important. **Many small warning signs of unsafe driving can add up to the decision to quit driving.**

Unsafe driving warning signs

- **Problems on the road.** Abrupt lane changes, braking, or acceleration. Failing to use the turn signal, or keeping the signal on without changing lanes. Drifting into other lanes. Driving on the wrong side of the road or in the shoulder.

- **Trouble with reflexes.** Trouble reading signs or navigating directions to get somewhere. Range-of-motion issues (looking over the shoulder, moving the hands or feet). Trouble moving from the gas to the brake pedal, or confusing the two pedals. Slow reaction to changes in the driving environment.
- **Increased anxiety and anger in the car.** Feeling more nervous or fearful while driving or feeling exhausted after driving. Frustration or anger at other drivers but oblivious to the frustration of other drivers, not understanding why they are honking. Reluctance from friends or relatives to be in the car with the senior driving
- **Trouble with memory or handling change.** Getting lost more often. Missing highway exits or backing up after missing an exit. Trouble paying attention to signals, road signs, pavement markings, or pedestrians.
- **Close calls and increased citations.** More frequent "close calls" (i.e., almost crashing), or 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.

Why does my family keep nagging me about driving?

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, including the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) and the [University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute](#).
- You might choose to brush up on your driving through a refresher course. Safety courses are offered in many communities and on-line through the [AARP Driver Safety course](#).
- 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.

Adjusting to life without driving

Adjusting to life without a car may be tough at first. Hopefully you have participated in the decision to stop driving and found other ways to continue your routine activities. Some tips may help to make the transition.

Reach out to others

Many seniors have difficulty asking family and friends for rides; others have problems accepting offers of rides. Be pro-active and work with them to make it comfortable for all. For example, it may be easier to adjust if you keep your car and have others drive it.

That way the car will feel more comfortable and familiar and decrease the sense of loss. If you need a little support the first time or two that you ride the bus, senior ride or other form of transportation ask a family member or friend to ride with you until you feel more confident.

This is also a good time to reach out and connect to new people, many of whom may offer rides. Consider having groceries delivered and learn to shop on the Internet. There are many conveniences and lots of interesting information at your fingertips on the World-Wide Web. Contact a local senior center, adult schools, or community college, for special computer courses for older adults.

Stay positive

Use positive language to describe your situation. For example, think about the money saved on car insurance, maintenance, registration, and gasoline. It's one of the advantages of giving up your car and leaves you able to pay for alternative transportation if necessary. Thinking about your transition as one that you *can* handle will speed the adjustment.

Talking to an older driver who should stop driving

If you find yourself in the position of talking to an older family member or friend about their driving, approach the issue with sensitivity. 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.

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.

When a 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 senior to hand over the car keys, then you may make an anonymous report to the Department of Motor Vehicles or recruit the family physician to write a prescription to stop driving. 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.

Transportation alternatives

If the decision is made to limit or stop driving altogether, it is essential to find alternative modes of transportation so that life remains as normal as possible. Getting out of the house is vital not just for practical reasons, but also for participation in every-day activities such as running errands, going to doctor and continuing to attend social and cultural events. If transportation is not available, it will be more difficult to give up driving. Become knowledgeable about transportation options, even before you reduce or stop driving. It will help facilitate the transition from driver to passenger.

Staying mobile without a car

An increasing number of innovative ways for seniors to get around without a car are available. These include:

- ride-sharing with friends and relatives
- public transit: buses, subways, and light rail
- community shuttles
- taxis, limousines, and chauffeur services
- private drivers
- specialized transit for seniors
- bicycles or tricycles (you can find large tricycles made for adults)
- walking
- motorized wheelchairs for nonambulatory seniors

For help in finding transit services, check local resources including senior centers and services agencies, faith-based organizations, your city or county Area Agency on Aging, an adult day service center, volunteer transportation programs and hospital discharge planning departments. When contacting these services, be sure they cover recreational outings as well as necessary errands. Both are important to your overall well-being.

CALL GENERATIONS, ALL ABOUT ELDERS TODAY FOR A FREE, CONFIDENTIAL TELEPHONE INTERVIEW. DON'T DO IT ALONE.

SUSAN AND ESTHER

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