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ELDERLY DRIVERS

Is your loved one driving safely?

Are elderly drivers safe? Yes...for the most part. The same can be said for teen drivers.

Do driving skills decline with age? Yes, but just like other age groups, driving skills vary from one person to another. Telling elderly drivers that it may be time to stop driving can be one of the most difficult milestones for caregivers. Driving represents freedom and independence for the elderly, the ability to visit friends, go to the movies and shop, without relying on anyone else.

Revoking an elderly person's driver's license over a certain age is not an acceptable solution. Driving skills vary widely at all ages. It is unfair to punish most elderly drivers for problems caused by only a few drivers.

When the question of declining driving abilities becomes personal, the issues involved become very emotional. Elderly drivers might get defensive, even angry when the subject of their driving abilities is raised. Thus, include the elderly person in the decision-making process if at all possible, rather than dictate a decision to them. It can also be very helpful if both you and your loved one discuss the matter together with other family members, doctors, and other people they respect, such as clergy and friends. But, despite your best efforts, you may still have to make the decision to stop for them for their own safety, and the safety of other drivers and pedestrians.

How does aging affect the abilities of elderly drivers?

Safe elderly drivers require the complex coordination of many different skills. The physical and mental changes that accompany aging can diminish the abilities of elderly drivers. These include:

- A slowdown in response time
- A loss of clarity in vision and hearing
- Drowsiness due to medications
- A reduction in the ability to focus or concentrate
- Lower tolerance for alcohol

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Taken separately, none of these changes automatically means that elderly drivers should stop. But caregivers need to regularly evaluate the elderly person's driving skills to determine if they need to alter driving habits or stop driving altogether.

A checklist on safe elderly driving

Watch for telltale signs of decline in the elderly person's driving abilities. Do they:

- Yes No Drive at inappropriate speeds, either too fast or too slow?
- Yes No Ask passengers to help check if it is clear to pass or turn?
- Yes No Respond slowly to or not notice pedestrians, bicyclists and other drivers?
- Yes No Ignore, disobey or misinterpret street signs and traffic lights?
- Yes No Fail to yield to other cars or pedestrians who have the right-of-way?
- Yes No Fail to judge distances between cars correctly?
- Yes No Become easily frustrated and angry?
- Yes No Appear drowsy, confused or frightened?
- Yes No Have one or more near accidents or near misses?
- Yes No Forget to turn on headlights after dusk?
- Yes No Have difficulty with glare from oncoming headlights, streetlights, or other bright or shiny objects, especially at dawn, dusk and at night?
- Yes No Have difficult turning their head, neck, shoulders or body while driving or parking?
- Yes No Ignore signs of mechanical problems, including underinflated tires? (one in 4 cars has at least one tire that is underinflated by 8 pounds or more; low tire pressure is a major cause of accidents.)
- Yes No Have too little strength to turn the wheel quickly in an emergency such as a tire failure, a child darting into traffic, etc.?
- Yes No Get lost repeatedly, even in familiar areas?

If the answer to one or more this question is "Yes", you should explore whether medical issues are affecting their driving skills.

Medical issue to consider

Caregivers need to know if the elderly person:

- Yes No Has had their vision and hearing tested recently?
- Yes No Has had a physical examination within the past year to test reflexes and make sure they don't have illnesses that would impact their driving?
- Yes No Is taking medications or combinations of medications that might make them drowsy or confused while driving?
- Yes No Has reduced or eliminated their intake of alcohol to compensate for lower tolerance?
- Yes No Has difficulty climbing a flight of stairs or walking more than one block?
- Yes No Has fallen – not counting a trip or stumble – once or more in the last year?
- Yes No Has had a physician told them that they should stop driving?

Adapting to change

Driving is not necessarily an all-or-nothing activity. Some programs exist to help elderly drivers adjust their driving to changes in their physical conditions:

AARPO (the American Association of Retired Persons) sponsors a driver Safety Program, which helps older people deal with issues such as how to compensate for vision problems associated with aging. And, the Association for Driver Rehabilitation offers referrals to specialists who teach people with disabilities, including those associated with aging, how to improve their driving.

There are many ways for the elderly to adjust so they are not a danger to themselves or others. Among them are:

- Avoid driving at night and, if possible, at dawn or dusk
- Drive only to familiar locations
- Avoid driving to places far away from home
- Avoid expressways (freeways) and rush hour traffic
- Leave plenty of time to get where they are going
- Don't drive alone

Other forms of transportation

Encourage your loved one to rely more on public transportation. This will reduce their time behind the wheel and help prepare them for the day when they can no longer drive. Many cities offer special discounts for seniors on buses and trains, and senior centers and community service agencies often provide special transportation alternatives.

How to get them to stop

If you feel strongly that your parents cannot drive safely, you have little choice but to get them to stop driving. If they agree without an argument, wonderful. If not, you have several options:

- Stage an intervention. This approach, commonly used with substance abusers, involves confronting the elderly driver as a group of concerned caregivers. The group should include family members, health care workers and anyone else respected by the senior. The intervention needs to be handled firmly but with compassion in order to break through the senior's denial of the issue.
- Contact the local Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and report your concerns. Depending upon state regulations and your senior's disabilities, it may be illegal for them to continue to drive. The DMV may do nothing more than send a letter, but this might help convince your parent or loved one to stop.
- Take the keys, disable the car or move it to a location beyond the elderly person's control. Leave the headlights on all night or disconnect the battery to disable the car. But if your loved one is likely to call the American Automobile Association (AAA) or a mechanic, you have no choice but to eliminate all access to the car. While this may seem extreme, it can save the lives of seniors, other drivers and pedestrians.

Related resources

AARP offers the highly recommend Driver Safety Program for older people. To find a class near you, visit AARP Web site www.aarp.org/drive/home.html, call toll-free at 1-888-227-7669, or write to them at 601 E Street NW, Washington, DC 20049.

The Association for Driver Rehabilitation offers referrals to professionals trained to help people with disabilities, including those associated with aging. Visit their Web site at www.driver-ed.org

And click on “Directory” in the left hand menu, or contact them at: P.O. Box 49, Edgerton, Wisconsin 53534, 1-608-884-8833.

The USAA Educational Foundation, AARP, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration developed a very informative booklet, “Driving Safely While Aging Gracefully,” (To view it online, visit their Web site at www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/olddrive/booklet.html.) It describes many of the physical changes associated with aging, and includes tips on coping with them so that older people can remain safe drivers.

