



### **When Driving Is No Longer Safe**

You may wonder about the performance of your senior loved one on the road. You want to support his or her continued independence, but on the other hand you worry about their driving abilities. Unfortunate as it is, we don't all retain the ability to drive a car throughout our lifetime. Medications, loss of vision, frailty, physical disabilities, and even senility can end anyone's driving career prematurely or permanently. So, how can you tell when the time has come for someone to stop driving?

Giving up driving is a transition that everyone involved wishes to put off as long as possible. For many older people, the very thought of losing a driver's license is upsetting to say the least. And with good reason. As a culture Americans rely heavily on cars for our everyday lives and to get where we're going -- to work, to the doctor, religious services, shopping, visiting friends and relatives, and sometimes even just to get out for a ride. A vast majority of seniors equate losing their driving privileges with becoming dependent, feeling trapped at home, curtailing the freedom to control when and where they can come and go, and be spontaneous.

It isn't always immediately obvious when your senior loved one has reached the point where it's time to give up the car keys. The decline of skills necessary to operate a car safely can occur both suddenly and subtly. There may be a pattern of close calls, violations like citations for driving too slow or too fast, or even minor fender benders or collisions. Your loved one may have increasing difficulty noticing pedestrians, signs, objects, or other vehicles.

Seniors can also have a readily observable decline in physical abilities that could interfere with safe driving. Perhaps arthritic joints or other conditions don't allow for the full range of motion required to operate a vehicle any longer. He or she may no longer get the physical activity needed to keep strong and flexible for the quick reactions needed for driving.

Vision is obviously a key component of driving ability, and age changes the way our eyes function. Our peripheral vision narrows, the retina becomes less sensitive to light and our ability to focus diminishes. Older eyes are also more prone to cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration and other vision impairments.

Over one third of adults over 65 suffer from some form of hearing loss. Poor hearing can compromise the ability to hear horns, screeching tires, sirens, and other sounds that would ordinarily alert someone to a potentially dangerous situation.

Medications that seniors take can also significantly impair driving. Side effects of many drugs compromise driving ability by causing drowsiness, blurred vision, confusion, or tremors. Others can also cause your loved one to be distracted or unable to concentrate sufficiently to pay attention to road conditions or other hazards.

As a caregiver, taking the keys away from your senior may be one of the most difficult things you ever have to do. But if you suspect that your loved one is a danger to him or herself or others on the road, don't wait for a serious accident to happen before you intervene. Here are some practical ways to assess your senior loved one's driving abilities.

- Take several drives with your senior at the wheel. Be an objective observer of his or her demeanor. Is he or she tense, easily irritated by other drivers or does he or she tire more after driving? If so, then your senior may be having some anxiety about driving.

- Is your senior reluctant to drive places, especially at night? Perhaps your senior is becoming aware of his or her own limitations. Ask him or her about it.
- Do you find that his or her reaction time to traffic lights or other driving cues has slowed?
- Is he or she aware of the driving environment? Does he or she tailgate, let the car drift close to the centerline? Do you hear complaints of getting lost more than you used to?
- Walk around his or her car and look for signs of damage that could indicate driving mishaps. If you find more damage than the occasional grocery cart ding, ask him or her to tell you about them.
- Have you observed questionable driving? Ask about any recent tickets for violations or ask if his or her car insurance rate have increased recently.
- Finally, check in with trusted friends or neighbors of your loved one to inquire about his or her driving. They may have observed problems but are reluctant to tell you for fear of invading your loved one's privacy. Once you break the ice and ask, they may want to help you keep your senior safe.

Age is not an absolute predictor of driving ability but as a caregiver it's important to recognize its impacts on what ultimately counts on the road—performance.

### **References**

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