

AgePage

Older Drivers

At age 78, Sheila thinks she's a good driver and likes the independence of getting around town on her own. But, in the past year, she was in a minor accident and had several near misses. She's noticed a few new dents on her car and doesn't know how they got there. Sheila wonders how she can stay safe behind the wheel.

Have you been worried about your driving? Have your family or friends expressed concern? Changes in your health may affect your driving skills over time. Don't risk hurting yourself or others. Talk to your doctor about any concerns you have about your health and driving.

Stiff Joints and Muscles

As you age, your joints may get stiff, and your muscles may weaken. Arthritis, which is common among older adults, might impact your ability to drive. These changes can make it harder to turn your head to look back, turn the steering wheel quickly, or brake safely.

Safe driving tips:

- ◆ See your doctor if pain, stiffness, or arthritis seem to get in the way of your driving.
- ◆ If possible, drive a car with automatic transmission, power steering, power brakes, and large mirrors.
- ◆ Be physically active or exercise to keep and even improve your strength and flexibility.

Trouble Seeing

Your eyesight can change as you get older. It might be harder to see people, things, and movement outside your direct line of sight. It may take you longer to read street or traffic signs or even recognize familiar places. At night you may have trouble seeing things clearly. Glare from oncoming headlights or street lights can be a problem. Depending on the time of the day, the sun might be blinding.

Eye diseases, such as glaucoma, cataracts, and macular degeneration, as well as some medicines, can also cause vision problems.

Safe driving tips:

- ◆ If you are 65 or older, see your eye doctor at least every 1 to 2 years. Ask if there are any ways to improve your eyesight. Many vision problems can be treated. For instance, cataracts might be removed with surgery.

- ◆ If you need glasses or contact lenses to see far away while driving, make sure your prescription is up-to-date and correct. And always wear them when you are driving.
- ◆ Cut back on night driving or stop driving at night if you have trouble seeing in the dark. Try to avoid driving during sunrise and sunset when the sun can be directly in your line of vision.

Trouble Hearing

As you get older, your hearing can change, making it harder to notice horns, sirens, or even noises coming from your own car. That can be a problem because these sounds warn you when you may need to pull over or get out of the way. It is important that you hear them.

Safe driving tips:

- ◆ Have your hearing checked at least every 3 years after age 50.
- ◆ Discuss concerns you have about hearing with your doctor. There may be things that can help. For example, a hearing aid might make a big difference. Just remember to use it when you drive.
- ◆ Try to keep the inside of the car as quiet as possible while driving.
- ◆ Pay attention to the warning lights on the dashboard. They tell you when something is wrong with your car.

Dementia and Driving

People with Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia may not be able to drive safely. They also may forget how to find familiar places like the grocery store or even their home.

In early stages of Alzheimer's, some people are able to keep driving. But, as memory and decision-making skills get worse, they need to stop.

People who have dementia often do not know they are having driving problems. Family and friends need to monitor the person's driving ability and take action as soon as they observe a potential problem. Work with the doctor to let the person know it's no longer safe to keep driving. Be prepared—the person may not respond well to the news.

Safe driving tips:

- ◆ Pay extra attention to the older person's driving skills. Do not ignore a problem—it's a danger for the driver and others on the road.
- ◆ Read *Driving Safety: Alzheimer's Caregiving Tips* and learn more about issues related to Alzheimer's disease and other dementias at www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers.

Slower Reaction Time and Reflexes

To drive safely and avoid accidents, you should be able to:

- ◆ React quickly to other cars and people on the road
- ◆ Make fast decisions while driving, following the proper rules of the road

As you get older, your reflexes might get slower, and you might not react as quickly as you could in the past. You might find that you have a shorter attention span, making it harder to do two things at once.

Stiff joints from arthritis or weak muscles also can make it harder to move quickly. You may lose some feeling or have tingling in your fingers and feet, which can make it difficult to steer or use the foot pedals. Parkinson's disease or limitations following a stroke can make it no longer safe to drive.

Safe driving tips:

- ◆ Leave more space between you and the car in front of you.
- ◆ Start braking early when you need to stop.
- ◆ Avoid high traffic areas when you can.
- ◆ If you must drive on a fast-moving highway, drive in the right-hand lane. Traffic moves more slowly there. This might give you more time to make safe driving decisions.

- ◆ Take a defensive driving course. Organizations like AARP, American Automobile Association (AAA), or your car insurance company can help you find a class near you. See “For More Information About Driving” for contact information.
- ◆ Be aware of how your body and mind might be changing, and talk with your doctor about any concerns.

Medications Can Affect Driving

Do you take any medicines that make you feel drowsy, lightheaded, or less alert than usual? Do medicines you take have a warning about driving? Many medications have side effects that can make driving unsafe. Pay attention to how these drugs may affect your driving.

Safe driving tips:

- ◆ Read medicine labels carefully. Look for any warnings.
- ◆ Make a list of all of your medicines, and talk to a doctor or pharmacist about how they can affect your driving.
- ◆ Don't drive if you feel lightheaded or drowsy.

Be a Safe Driver

Maybe you already know that driving at night, on the highway, or in bad weather is a problem for you. Some older drivers also

have problems when yielding the right of way, turning (especially making left turns), changing lanes, passing, and using expressway ramps.

Safe driving tips:

- ◆ Have your driving skills checked by a driving rehabilitation specialist, occupational therapist, or other trained professional. Driving programs and clinics can test your driving and suggest ways to improve your skills.
- ◆ Update your driving skills by taking a driving refresher course. Some car insurance companies may lower your bill when you pass this type of class.
- ◆ When in doubt, don't go out. Bad weather like rain, ice, or snow can make it hard for anyone to drive. Try to wait until the weather is better, or use buses, taxis, or other transportation services.
- ◆ Look for routes that help you avoid areas where driving can be a problem. For example, choose a route that avoids highways or other high-speed roadways. Or, find a way to go that requires few or no left turns. Left turns can be especially dangerous because you have to cross oncoming traffic and be aware of all the cars around you.
- ◆ Ask your doctor if any of your health problems might make it unsafe for you to drive. Together,

you can make a plan to help you keep driving and decide when it is no longer safe to drive.

Do You Have Concerns About an Older Driver?

Are you worried about your parent or other older family member or friend driving? Sometimes it can be hard for an older person to realize that he or she is no longer a safe driver. You might want to observe the person's driving skills. For example, make sure that the driver:

- ◆ Follows the rules of the road, including speed limits, traffic lights, and stop signs
- ◆ Yields the right-of-way
- ◆ Is aware of other vehicles, motorcyclists, bicyclists, pedestrians, and road hazards
- ◆ Merges and changes lanes safely and stays in the lane when turning and driving straight
- ◆ Can easily move the foot between the gas and the brake pedals, and does not confuse the two

If it's not possible to observe the older person driving, look out for these signs that he or she is having problems at the wheel:

- ◆ Has multiple vehicle crashes, "near misses," and/or new dents in the car

- ◆ Receives two or more traffic tickets or warnings within the last 2 years; increases in car insurance premiums because of driving issues
- ◆ Neighbors or friends observe unsafe driving
- ◆ Has anxiety about driving at night
- ◆ Develops health issues that might affect driving ability, including
 - problems with vision, hearing, and/or movement
- ◆ Complains about the speed, sudden lane changes, or actions of other drivers
- ◆ Shares that a doctor recommended he or she modify driving habits or quit driving entirely

Having “The Talk” About Driving

Talking with an older person about his or her driving is often difficult. Here are some things that might help when having the talk.

- ◆ **Be prepared.** Observe the older driver for potential problems. Learn about local services to help someone who can no longer drive. Identify the person’s transportation needs.
- ◆ **Avoid confrontation.** Try having a one-on-one conversation. Use “I” messages rather than “You” messages. For example, say, “I am concerned about your safety when you are driving,” rather than, “You’re no longer a safe driver.”
- ◆ **Stick to the issue.** Discuss the driver’s skills, not his or her age.
- ◆ **Focus on safety and maintaining independence.** Be clear that the goal is for the older driver to continue the activities he or she currently enjoys while staying safe. Offer to help the person stay independent. For example, you might say, “I’ll help you figure out how to get where you want to go if driving isn’t possible.”
- ◆ **Be positive and supportive.** Recognize the importance of a driver’s license to the older person. Understand that he or she may become defensive, angry, hurt, or withdrawn. You might say: “I understand that this may be upsetting,” or “We’ll work together to find a solution.”

Is It Time to Give Up Driving?

We all age differently. For this reason, there is no way to set one age when everyone should stop driving. So, how do you know if you should stop? To help decide, ask yourself:

- ◆ Do other drivers often honk at me?
- ◆ Have I had some accidents, even if they were only “fender benders”?
- ◆ Do I get lost, even on roads I know?
- ◆ Do cars or people walking seem to appear out of nowhere?
- ◆ Do I get distracted while driving?
- ◆ Have family, friends, or my doctor said they’re worried about my driving?
- ◆ Am I driving less these days because I’m not as sure about my driving as I used to be?
- ◆ Do I have trouble staying in my lane?
- ◆ Do I have trouble moving my foot between the gas and the brake pedals, or do I sometimes confuse the two?
- ◆ Have I been pulled over by a police officer about my driving?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, it may be time to talk with your doctor about driving or have a driving assessment.

How Will You Get Around?

Are you worried you won’t be able to do the things you want and need to do if you stop driving? If so, you’re not alone. Many people have this concern, but there may be more ways to get around than you think. For example, some areas provide free or low-cost bus or taxi services for older people. Some communities offer a carpool service or scheduled trips to the grocery store, mall, or other places of interest. Religious and civic groups sometimes have volunteers who will drive you where you want to go.

Your local Area Agency on Aging can help you find services in your area. Call 1-800-677-1116, or go to www.eldercare.gov to find your nearest Area Agency on Aging.

You can also think about using a car service. Sound pricey? Don’t forget—it costs a lot to own a car. If you don’t have to make car payments or pay for insurance, maintenance, gas, oil, or other car expenses, then you may be able to afford to take taxis or other public transportation. You can also buy gas for friends or family members who give you rides.

More Safe Driving Tips

Before you leave home:

- ◆ Plan to drive on streets you know.
- ◆ Only drive to places that are easy to get to and close to home.
- ◆ Avoid risky spots like ramps and left turns.
- ◆ Add extra time for travel if you must drive when conditions are poor.
- ◆ Limit how much you drive at night.
- ◆ Don't drive when you are stressed or tired.

While you are driving:

- ◆ Always wear your seat belt and make sure your passengers wear their seat belts, too.
- ◆ Wear your glasses and/or hearing aid, if you use them.
- ◆ Stay off your cell phone.
- ◆ Avoid distractions such as eating, listening to the radio, or chatting.
- ◆ Make sure there is enough space behind your car. If someone follows you too closely, slow down and pull over if needed to let that person pass you.
- ◆ Use your window defrosters to keep both the front and back windows clear.
- ◆ Keep your headlights on at all times.

Car safety:

- ◆ Drive a car with air bags.
- ◆ Check your windshield wiper blades often and replace them when needed.
- ◆ Keep your headlights clean and aimed in the right direction.
- ◆ Think about getting hand controls for both the gas and brake pedals if you have leg problems.
- ◆ Keep your car in good repair to avoid problems on the road.

For More Information About Driving

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

1-202-638-5944

publicaffairs@national.aaa.com (email)

www.seniordriving.aaa.com

AARP

1-888-687-2277 (toll-free)

1-877-342-2277 (español/línea gratis)

1-877-434-7598 (TTY/toll-free)

member@aarp.org (email)

www.aarp.org/families/driver_safety

The Hartford

1-860-547-5000

safedriving@thehartford.com (email)

www.thehartford.com/alzheimers

National Library of Medicine:

MedlinePlus

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/

motorvehiclesafety.html

National Center on Senior Transportation

1-866-528-6278 (toll-free)

1-202-347-7385 (TTY)

ncst@easterseals.com (email)

www.seniortransportation.net

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

1-888-327-4236 (toll-free)

1-800-424-9153 (TTY/toll-free)

ncsaweb@dot.gov (email)

www.nhtsa.gov/Senior-Drivers

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov (email)

www.nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/espanol

To order publications (in English or Spanish) or sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from the NIA, go to www.nia.nih.gov/health.

Visit www.nihseniorhealth.gov, a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health and wellness information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to make the type larger.



National Institute
on Aging

NIH...Turning Discovery Into Health®

March 2015