

Older Drivers

Adjusting to diminished ability. Giving up the keys.



*Don't Feel Guilty ∞
You Can't Do It All!*

Driving is symbolic of total freedom and control. As people age, the issue of control becomes a source of anxiety and fear for some. Loss of control of anything that symbolizes independence can be a difficult issue.

How aging affects driving skills

Driving requires the complex coordination of many different skills that diminish with age. These include:

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

Taken separately, none of these changes automatically means that elderly drivers should stop.

Recognizing diminished driving skills

Caregivers should regularly evaluate the elderly person's driving skills to determine if they need to alter driving habits or stop driving altogether. Do They:

- Drive at inappropriate speeds – too fast or too slow?
- Ask passengers to help check if it is clear to pass or turn?
- Respond slowly to pedestrians, bicyclists or other drivers?
- Ignore, disobey or misinterpret signs and traffic lights?
- Fail to yield to other cars or pedestrians who have the right-of-way?
- Appear drowsy, confused or frightened?
- Have one or more near accidents or near misses?
- Drift across lane markings or bump into curbs?
- Have difficulty with glare from oncoming headlights, especially at dawn, dusk and at night?
- Have difficulty turning their head, neck, shoulders or body while driving or parking?
- Ignore signs of mechanical problems, including under inflated tires?
- Have too little strength to turn the wheel quickly in an emergency such as a tire failure, a child darting into traffic, etc.?
- Get lost repeatedly, even in familiar areas?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is "yes," you should explore whether medical issues are affecting their driving skills.

Adapting to diminished driving skills

There are many ways for elderly drivers to adjust so they are not a danger to themselves or others.

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

How to get them to stop

If you feel that a loved-one can't drive safely, you have little choice but to get them to stop driving. If they resist, you have several options:

- Stage an intervention. Confront 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.
- Contact the local Department of Motor Vehicles and report your concerns. Depending upon state regulations and your senior's disabilities, it may be illegal for them to continue to drive.
- Take the keys, disable the car or move it to a location beyond the elderly person's control. Disconnect the battery to disable the car. Sometimes, you have no choice but to eliminate all access to the car.

Need more information?

AAA Senior Drivers.Org
www.seniordrivers.org

Texas Dept. of Public Safety
<http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/>

National Safety Council
www.nsc.org

Doctor Driving
<http://www.drdriving.org/index.htm>