

# Aging, Alzheimer Disease and Driving

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Older drivers bring a wealth of experience to the driver's seat; that is why, on average, drivers in their fifties and sixties have just about the lowest crash rates of anyone on the road. However, as some of the skills required for optimal driving performance begin to decline at older ages, research shows that crash rates begin to increase when drivers reach their late 60's or early 70's, and increase more rapidly after age 75. Many drivers' ability and comfort behind the wheel can begin to change around age 55. This is normal since aging affects hearing, vision, distance and depth perception and reaction time. Because of these changes, many older drivers start to change their driving habits around the same time. For example, they often choose not drive less at night, avoid driving during rush hour or bad weather and make other similar changes on their own.

What happens when an older person's cognitive skills begin to decline due to a diagnosis of Alzheimer disease (AD) or other dementia? One significant symptom of AD is decline in judgment and reasoning skills. A typical driver makes 20 decisions per mile, with less than half a second to act in order to avoid a collision. After all, driving is very complicated. Therefore, as we age and our reaction time slows down, it is understandable that driving may become more difficult. It is not easy to make all of those decisions so quickly. But for a person with AD, decision-making is even more difficult. Indeed, as many family members know, the decline in reasoning and judgment is also why it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to rationally discuss giving up driving with a family member with dementia.



## **How should one discuss driving with a parent, spouse or other relative?**

It is important to understand that driving represents independence to most people so don't think it will be easy to get someone to give up the car keys. Also, many cities do not have adequate public transit so giving up driving really does mean giving up some independence. On the other hand, if the older person is no longer safe behind the wheel, taking away the keys must be done for their own safety and the safety of others.

## **Warning signs that can indicate a problem behind the wheel:**

- ☹ Anxiety, feeling uncomfortable and nervous or fearful while driving.
- ☹ Lack of concentration—dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, and curbs. Discovering damage on the car that cannot be explained.
- ☹ Less control of muscles making it harder to push down on the pedals or turn the steering wheel.
- ☹ Medications can also affect the ability to handle a car safely.
- ☹ Trouble controlling anger, sadness or other emotions that can affect driving.
- ☹ Friends or relatives do not want to get in the car with the older driver.

- ⊗ Frequent traffic citations or being stopped by the police several times in the recent past.
- ⊗ Close calls, almost crashing due to distractions or lack of proper judgment at intersections, in traffic, or on highway entrances/exit ramps.
- ⊗ Trouble remembering directions and/or getting lost on routes that were once familiar.
- ⊗ Difficulty turning around to check over shoulder while backing up or changing lanes.
- ⊗ Slower responses to unexpected situations such as children or animals darting into traffic.

**If you suspect a problem with driving, it is important that you get in the car with the older driver and observe them directly. If you are afraid to get in the car with them--that should tell you something.**

### **When is the best time to talk about driving with an older person?**

The best-case scenario is to have a discussion about driving before it becomes an issue. For example, retirement may be a good time to bring it up. Possible things to discuss with an older driver include: selecting a safer car, planning for getting to and from the grocery, doctors' appointments, social outings, church and so on. Following are some suggestions that may help to begin the conversation:

- ⌚ Always start difficult discussions by stressing your concern for their well being and base it on things you have observed.
- ⌚ Acknowledge that driving is important and you want to help them remain as independent and functional as possible.
- ⌚ Acknowledge the person's strengths. They didn't get this far without good driving skills.
- ⌚ Be positive and supportive, not bossy or critical when discussing driving concerns. It will not help if you alienate them or make them angry.
- ⌚ Have these conversations early and often.

### **How does one make the decision to give up driving?**

This is an individual decision based on each person's level of decline. There is no one easy answer. It may be easier for some people to give up driving in stages.

The following ideas have helped some people make the decision:

- 📁 Reduce driving at twilight and night, during bad weather and busy traffic times.
- 📁 Drive only regular, familiar routes in the middle of day.
- 📁 Help them plan a route and have them stick to it.
- 📁 Enlist the help of other family members, friends and neighbors—have a driving schedule.
- 📁 Encourage carpooling.
- 📁 Have your doctor write a prescription that says “no more driving.”
- 📁 Walk or take public transportation with them. If they see you doing it, they may follow.
- 📁 Some families have found that selling the car made it easier but others have reported that getting rid of the car too early was a mistake. Assess the situation carefully and remember, you know your older driver the best.
- 📁 Register in the Alzheimer's Association Medic Alert/Safe Return program. Call 1-800-272-3900 for details.



## Recommended Resources:

Alzheimer's Association Medic Alert/Safe Return 1-800-272-3900

The Veterans' Administration (VA) Safe Driving Initiative involves both an information campaign and a strategic research plan. Download the Veterans' Safe Driving Initiative Brochure [http://www.safedriving.va.gov/docs/safe\\_driving\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.safedriving.va.gov/docs/safe_driving_brochure.pdf). The VA website also provides links to other specific driving resources from the Department of Transportation and FDA at <http://www.safedriving.va.gov/resources/driving.asp>.

Easter Seals Crossroads Drivers Program, (Indianapolis, IN) 317-466-1000

AARP Driver Safety Classes 800-350-7025 [www.aarpdriversafety.org](http://www.aarpdriversafety.org) -or- 877-846-3299 to find a driving course near you.

Rehabilitation Hospital of Indiana's Return to Driving program is dedicated to promoting safety and independence in driving. Their specially trained occupational therapists' use vehicles with state-of-the-art adaptive equipment and computer systems to address the visual, cognitive, and physical impairments that affect an individual's ability to drive. Visit <http://rhin.com> or call 317-329-2000.

The following booklets are available from the AAA Foundation (American Automobile Association) by calling 1-800-993-7222 or by visiting their website at [www.aaafoundation.org/store](http://www.aaafoundation.org/store).

Drivers 65 Plus: Test Your Own Performance (A self-eating form of questions, facts and suggestions for safe driving). The short questionnaire tests important driving-related skills. Intended for drivers over 65, the booklet suggests ways to cope with any revealed deficiencies.

<https://www.aaafoundation.org/sites/default/files/driver65.pdf>.

How to Help an Older Driver (A guide for Planning Safe Transportation) is only available by downloading at <https://www.aaafoundation.org/sites/default/files/ODlarge.pdf>

The Older and Wiser Driver

<https://www.aaafoundation.org/sites/default/files/older%26wiser.pdf>

Road Rage (How to Avoid Aggressive

Driving) <https://www.aaafoundation.org/sites/default/files/RoadRageBrochure.pdf>

[www.roadwiserx.com](http://www.roadwiserx.com) allows you to type in the name of a specific medication to see how it may affect driving.

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