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Senior Driving: Warning Signs and Helping an Unsafe Driver to Stop Driving

The information for this article was taken from the following website
http://helpguide.org/elder/senior_citizen_driving.htm

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Driver safety is an important issue for seniors. Everyone ages differently, so some people are perfectly capable of continuing to drive in their seventies, eighties, and even beyond. Many elders, however, are at higher risk for road accidents. The elderly are more likely to receive traffic citations for failing to yield, turning improperly, and running red lights and stop signs – an indication of decreased driving ability. A person 65 or older who is involved in a car accident is more likely to be seriously hurt, more likely to require hospitalization, and more likely to die than younger people involved in the same crash. In particular, fatal crash rates rise sharply after a driver has reached the age of 70.

If you know an older driver who is experiencing trouble on the road, it is important to carefully monitor the situation. Because everyone ages differently, some drivers are safe behind the wheel well into their eighth or ninth decade, while others need to find other sources of transportation much earlier.

Risk Factors of Aging That Can Affect Driving Ability

Visual Decline – Vision declines with age, which means depth perception and judging the speed of oncoming traffic becomes more difficult. The eyes also lose the ability to process light, which makes night vision worse and causes more sensitivity to bright sunlight and glare. By age 60, you need three times the amount of light that you did at age 20 in order to drive safely after nightfall.

Hearing Loss – Approximately one-third of adults over age 65 are hearing-impaired. Because hearing loss happens gradually, seniors may not realize they are missing important cues when driving, such as honking, emergency sirens, or a child's bicycle bell.

Limited mobility and increased reaction time – With age, flexibility may decrease as response time increases. A full range of motion is crucial on the road. In addition, chronic conditions can limit mobility (rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson's disease, sleep apnea, heart disease, or diabetes).

Medications – People often take more medications as they age. Certain medications, as well as a combination of medications and alcohol, can increase driving risk. Be particularly careful about medication side effects and interactions between medications.

Drowsiness – Aging can make sleeping more difficult, resulting in daytime tiredness and an increased tendency to doze off during the day (or while driving). In addition, certain prescription drugs cause drowsiness.

Dementia or brain impairment – Mental impairment or dementia makes driving more dangerous and more frustrating. Brain impairment may cause delayed reactions to sudden or confusing situations on the road.

Warning signs of unsafe driving

If a senior who is close to you is finding driving more difficult than before, watch for signs of unsafe driving. If you notice any of the warning signs, it is time to reassess the senior's road risk. Many small warning signs of unsafe driving can add up to the important decision to quit driving.

- Abrupt lane changes, braking, or acceleration
- More frequent “close calls” (i.e., almost crashing), or dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs, etc
- Failing to use the turn signal, or keeping the signal on without changing lanes
- Drifting into other lanes
- Driving on the wrong side of the road or on the shoulder
- Trouble reading signs or navigating directions to get somewhere
- Missing highway exits or backing up after missing an exit
- Range-of-motion issues (looking over the shoulder, moving hands or feet, etc.)
- Trouble moving the foot from the gas to the brake pedal, or confusing the two pedals
- Feeling more nervous or fearful while driving or feeling exhausted after driving
- More conflict on the road: other drivers honking; frustration or anger at other drivers
- Oblivious to the frustration of other drivers, not understanding why they are honking
- Reluctance from friends or relatives to be in the car with the senior driving
- Getting lost more often
- Trouble paying attention to signals, road signs, pavement markings, or pedestrians
- Slow reaction to changes in the driving environment
- Increased traffic tickets or “warnings” by traffic or law enforcement officers.

Steps to take if you are concerned about the safety of a senior driver

If you are concerned about an elderly driver, closely monitor his/her driving before deciding whether there is a need to brush up driving skills or give up the driver's license altogether. Some steps include:

- Watch for changes in driving habits, general behavior, and health.
- Encourage a driving evaluation through your local Department of Motor Vehicles, along with refresher driving lessons and the AARP Driver Safety Course.
- Offer the senior some self-evaluation tools to assess driving risk, or work together on these quizzes. You can get these on-line. See resources below.
- Explore ways to reduce driving, such as making purchases on-line or through mail-order catalogs. If possible, arrange for home delivery of groceries, and home visits by clergy, medical and personal care providers, and government service providers.
- If necessary, get support from the older adult's primary care physician and other family members.
- Research and propose alternative modes of transportation. Maybe the senior can continue to drive some of the time (such as in the daytime or off the freeway), and alternative transportation can fill the need for rides at other times.

Talking to a senior driver who should stop driving

If you feel that it is time to talk to a senior close to you about stopping driving, approach the issue with sensitivity. A driver's license signifies more than the ability to drive a car; it is a symbol of freedom, independence and independent living self-sufficiency, fun and spontaneity and involvement in social and religious activities. Understandably, driving is not a privilege that anyone wants to relinquish willingly. As important as it is to treat the senior driver with respect and not jump to unjust conclusions, it is also important to help the elderly driver retire from the road. Start slowly and try to persuade the senior to give up the keys.

Some approaches that may work:

- **Be understanding about resistance.** The senior may dismiss you and refuse to listen to you. Emotion may get in the way of a rational decision.
- **Ask questions, rather than make demands. For example,** "Would you consider not driving at night?"
- **Talk about safety considerations.** Many senior drivers who shouldn't be driving have already had an accident or some close calls. Remind the impaired driver of the danger of serious injuries and that the safety of others is also at risk.
- **Explain transportation options.** Help the senior driver see that living without a car won't make him/her permanently homebound. Acknowledge the lifestyle change, but also show how to continue favorite activities and to remain mobile.

- **Emphasize monetary savings.** The cost savings associated with giving up a car may be a selling point for some older drivers. Costs include insurance, gasoline, maintenance and repairs, and license and registration fees.
- **Offer rides and visits.** Volunteer to come by once a week or to provide rides on a regular basis for things like grocery shopping, library visits, or doctors' appointments.
- **Seek confirmation of the situation.** Some elderly drivers may be aware of their faltering ability, but be reluctant to give up driving completely. Another person's concerns may force the senior driver to act and may even feel relieved to have someone else help make the decision to stop driving.

When a senior driver refuses to give up the keys

If the senior driver refuses to give up the keys, you may need to take stronger steps. Ideas for further action include:

- Take away the car keys.
- Disable the car or remove it from the senior driver's residence.
- Ask the elderly driver's doctor to write a prescription stating "no driving."
- Enlist the help of a local police officer to explain the importance of safe driving and the legal implications of unsafe driving.
- Some seniors may forget that they aren't supposed to drive. If that is the case, it is even more important to remove the car or the keys to make it impossible to drive.

Resources

Following are several Websites that may be especially valuable regarding driving safety for older adults.

- **[Thehartford.com](#)** – The Hartford/MIT At the Crossroads: A Guide to Alzheimer's, Dementia & Driving
- **[AARP.org/55alive](#)**
- **[Nhtsa.dot.gov](#)** – National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- **[Nsc.org](#)** – National Safety Council
- **[TheDefensiveDrivingSchool.com](#)**
- **[Driver-ed.org](#)** – Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialists
- **[Eldercare.gov](#)**
- **[HighwaySafety.org](#)** – Insurance Institute for Highway Safety
- American Medical Association Guidelines for Older Drivers
- **[Aota.org](#)** – American Occupational Therapy Association
- **[AAA.com](#)** – AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
- **[AgeNet.com](#)**

- SeniorDrivers.org

Recommended Book: **The Driving Dilemma** by Elizabeth Dugan, PH.D