

Driving Safety for Older Adults

- Assessing Driving Skills
- Safer Driving
- When Should a Person No Longer Drive?

For most Americans, the automobile represents independence, control and mobility. We couldn't wait to get our first drivers license and access to the family car when we were teenagers...and we'd like to keep driving as long as possible. But the normal changes of aging can make driving more challenging. Impediments to safe driving include...

- hearing loss
- vision problems
- decreased reaction time
- memory loss
- limited manual dexterity.

In addition, the loss of depth perception and peripheral vision may narrow the margin of safety on crowded roads and highways.

Older adults and their families should assess driving ability periodically, both to determine ways of improving driving skills, and to evaluate whether the individual is still capable of safely operating a motor vehicle.

Making Changes for Safer Driving

There are several good ways to improve driving skills and to extend safe driving capability:

1. Consider taking a refresher driving course. Classes on defensive driving for older drivers focus on specific strategies



for dealing with the impact of the aging process on driving. These programs, sometimes called “55 Alive Classes,” are offered through insurance companies and senior groups.

2. When filling any prescriptions, ask your doctor or pharmacist if your medications have any potential side effects that could hinder your ability to drive.
3. Have regular eye examinations.
4. Make sure your car is in good working condition. Have it checked not only for mechanical problems, but also for such often-overlooked defects as carpet and pedal wear, which could cause the accelerator to stick or the foot to slip.
5. Keep windows, mirrors, windshields, and wiper blades clean, as well as headlights,

taillights, and turn signals. Dirt and grime can hinder both your visibility and other drivers' ability to see you.

6. Have your tires regularly checked for low air pressure and excessive tread wear.
7. Make modifications to the vehicle itself for enhanced driving safety. For example: improved side and rear-view mirrors; a rear-window brake light; a back-up warning buzzer; steering wheel grips; and pedal adjustments.
8. If the car is large and difficult to maneuver, consider trading it for a smaller car, which might be easier to handle and park.
9. To avoid the most challenging driving situations, investigate route and time of day adjustments. If night vision has diminished, car trips should be scheduled during daylight hours. Busy highways and rush hour traffic can be avoided with some advance planning and allowance for additional travel time. Boarding buses at Park and Ride lots can eliminate driving in the most congested areas.
10. Make sure that insurance is adequate and kept current.

If It's Time to Give up the Car

Some older drivers become increasingly nervous about their driving ability, and consequently become less mobile in the community. Some keep driving until an incident occurs—a scare, a minor accident, or worse—and then quit driving abruptly, without having made plans for what they will do without the car. And others are in denial, refusing to face up to limitations until family members or the department of licensing step in.

It doesn't have to be that way. When you first begin to have concerns about your driving, that

is the time to begin planning your post-driving strategy. Think of this as just another aging challenge to be addressed, and then use your best problem-solving skills to keep yourself active and mobile.

The first thing to do when considering becoming a non-driver is to add up what owning and maintaining a car costs you. Car payments, insurance, repairs, gasoline, parking fees—all these should go into your calculation. For most people, the total is considerable. Think of those dollars as money available to you for alternative transportation.

Knowing you have this “transportation allowance” available to you, begin to calculate your alternatives:

Do you live on or near a bus route? Where are the places you can conveniently travel using the bus? If you've never explored your local bus routes, take a field trip! Just hop on and take a ride some day, making sure you know how to return to the same spot. Look for grocery stores, dry cleaners, other shopping possibilities along the route.

Do you have family or friends who might enjoy giving you a ride to church, to your doctor's office, to the barber or beauty shop, on a weekly shopping trip?

Is there special transportation for seniors in your area? Where will they take you? How convenient is it? How much lead time is needed to use this service?

How much do cab rides cost to your usual destinations? Will a cab company take “standing assignments” on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis? Once you have figured out how the first three modes of transportation will work for you, use taxis cabs to fill in the blanks.

With this kind of planning, many seniors lose their anxiety over giving up driving. It still may not be easy, but having a workable plan for getting where you want to go is a major step forward.

When the time comes to put away the keys, be creative in your approach. You might try these suggestions:

- Leave your car in the garage for a while and see how you get along not using it.
- Set a trial period during which you will try out transportation options.
- Give your car as a gift to a favorite charity or to a grandchild.

- Sell the car and set the money aside to increase your transportation fund.

Take advantage of planning for being a non-driver if that time comes. Be proactive; don't wait for circumstances to make decisions for you. If you're honest with yourself, you will know when you need to begin making plans. Giving yourself an extra margin of safety is the right thing to do for other drivers on the road, and it can, above all, be a gift to yourself and your family!

CHECKLIST FOR A SAFE CAR TRIP

Whether you're going to the market or on a vacation trip, here are some things to consider before you turn the key:

- Plan your route before you leave, and then stick to that route.
- If you're uncomfortable driving at high speeds, avoid the freeway. Just allow more travel time for your trip.
- Try to steer clear of rush hour traffic and congested routes.
- Don't drive if you're upset or angry.
- Buckle up! Everyone in your car should wear a seatbelt. (Remember: Airbags are supplements to seatbelts, not substitutes.)
- Make yourself visible by turning on headlights in poor weather, even during daylight hours.
- Always use turn signals to indicate your intentions.
- Be sure your signals stop blinking after you've turned. An unintentional signal could result in an accident.
- Watch and listen for emergency vehicles.
- Look in your mirrors frequently, and always use a head-check to your "blind spot" when changing lanes.
- Maintain a safe distance from the vehicle in front of you. Using a reference point like a road sign, utility pole, or milepost, count "one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three." If you pass the reference point within those three seconds, you are too close.
- Avoid distractions by keeping radio volume low and conversations to a minimum.