

## Safe Driving for Seniors

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Most people have had a close call with another car, a person walking, or an object while driving. Many people have also had car accidents. How do older adults and caregivers know when these situations are cause for concern?

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### Q . How old is too old to drive?

A . People can be great drivers or bad drivers at any age. Generally, young, new drivers tend to have the worst driving records. Experienced, middle-aged drivers are likely to have the best driving records. Overall, older drivers are safe and make appropriate adjustments for their abilities and limitations. In fact, the total number of accidents that involve older drivers is lower than for any other age group. However, the number of accidents per mile driven goes up around age 60, and gets much higher after 75.

Understand: older age doesn't cause accidents! Many older adults take certain medicines and have conditions that increase the risk of unsafe driving. Some conditions that might be a factor in unsafe driving include: Alzheimer's disease, vision problems, stroke, Parkinson's disease, arthritis, and diabetes.

### Q . What are some signs of unsafe driving?

A . Signs include:

- Stopping at a green light;
- Stopping when there is no sign to stop;
- Stopping in the middle of intersections;
- Mistaking the gas pedal for the brake pedal;
- Finding traffic signs and signals confusing;
- Running stop signs or red lights without realizing it;
- Hitting or nearly hitting cars, people or objects without realizing it;
- Getting lost in familiar places; and
- Moving from one lane to another without looking.

### Q . What can people do to be safer drivers?

A . Although the risk of crashes and serious crash-related injuries usually goes up as people get older, there are many steps that can be taken at any age to drive more safely.

Steps include:

- Avoid driving at night, in heavy traffic, and on unfamiliar roads;
- Know the rules of the road. They can be found in a state driver's handbook;
- Take a driving class from a driving instructor or a rehabilitation specialist; and

- Take a refresher course offered by groups such as:
  - [AARP](#) (formally known as the American Association of Retired Persons);
  - The Automobile Association of America (AAA); or
  - The National Safety Council

**Q . Who can help figure out if driving skills are a problem?**

**A .** Rehabilitation Centers (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation Centers, Veterans Administration Centers) usually provide the best driving evaluations. Driving schools may help, but remember that they are not trained to recognize or diagnose medical problems. State licensing agencies also give driving evaluations.

**Q . How can a health care provider help address concerns about driving?**

**A .** It is very important that the doctor or other health care provider cares and listens carefully to concerns about driving ability. Once the issue is discussed, a thorough medical and medication review should be conducted. This will help determine if there are treatable problems that may be contributing to driving difficulties. Vision and memory tests are important. Finally, the doctor or health care provider may be able to suggest a driver's education/refresher class. A person may also be referred to a driving evaluation program.

**Q . What can caregivers do if they are concerned about a loved one's driving?**

**A .** This can be the hardest issue that caregivers face as an older person develops conditions that make them unfit to drive. It is important to recognize how important driving is to many older people. It allows them to go where they want. It is also a symbol of independence. Caregivers need to be very clear about the specific problems that they have noticed. Caregivers can look to health care providers for help. Doctors and other health care providers can help find out if there is a mental or physical problem that limits driving abilities.

Doctors can help affirm caregivers' concerns. They may write a prescription, indicating that an older person should not drive. They may also send a report to the state driver's licensing agency. Many states respond to reports only when they come from doctors or the police.

**Q . What are some sources for more information?**

**A .** For information on driver evaluation, driver education, and other transportation choices, contact:

- Association for Driver Educators for the Disabled: 1-608-884-8833 ([www.driver-ed.org](http://www.driver-ed.org))
- AARP: 1-800-424-3410 ([www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org))
- Alzheimer's Association: 1-800-272-3900 ([www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org))
- National Safety Council: 1-630-685-1121 ([www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org))

Often, local aging centers and agencies are the best source for information about local transportation programs.

