

How does aging affect the abilities of elderly drivers?

Safe elderly drivers require the complex coordination of many different skills. The physical and mental changes that accompany aging can diminish the abilities of elderly drivers. 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.

A checklist on safe elderly driving

Be aware of telltale signs of decline in the elderly person's driving abilities. Do they:

- Drive at inappropriate speeds, either too fast or too slow?
- Ask passengers to help check if it is clear to pass or turn?
- Respond slowly to or not notice pedestrians, bicyclists and other drivers?
- Ignore, disobey or misinterpret street signs and traffic lights?
- Fail to yield to other cars or pedestrians who have the right-of-way?
- Fail to judge distances between cars correctly?
- Become easily frustrated and angry?
- Appear drowsy, confused or frightened?
- Have one or more near accidents or near misses?
- Drift across lane markings or bump into curbs?
- Forget to turn on headlights after dusk?
- Have difficulty with glare from oncoming headlights, streetlights, or other bright or shiny objects, 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 underinflated tires? (one in 4 cars has at least one tire that is underinflated by 8 pounds or more; low tire pressure is a major cause of accidents.)
- 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.

Medical issues to consider

Consider:

- Has had their vision and hearing tested recently?
- Has had a physical examination within the past year to test reflexes and make sure they don't have illnesses that would impact their driving?
- Is taking medications or combinations of medications that might make them drowsy or confused while driving?
- Has reduced or eliminated their intake of alcohol to compensate for lower tolerance?
- Has difficulty climbing a flight of stairs or walking more than one block?
- Has fallen - not counting a trip or stumble - once or more in the last year?
- Has had a physician told them that they should stop driving?

Adapting to changes

Driving is not necessarily an all-or-nothing activity. Some programs exist to help elderly drivers adjust their driving to changes in their physical condition:

AARP (the American Association of Retired Persons) sponsors the 55-Alive Mature Driver Program which helps older people deal with issues such as how to compensate for vision problems associated with aging. The Association for Driver Rehabilitation offers referrals to specialists who teach people with disabilities, including those associated with aging, how to improve their driving.

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

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

Other forms of transportation

Encourage your loved one to rely more on public transportation. This will reduce their time behind the wheel and help prepare them for the day when they can no longer drive. Many cities offer special discounts for seniors on buses and trains, and senior centers and community service agencies often provide special transportation alternatives.