

AgePage

Older Drivers

At age 78, Sheila thinks she's a good driver, and she would like to stay that way. But lately, she has been in minor accidents. Sheila wonders how she can stay safe behind the wheel. Will taking a class for older drivers help?

You may have asked yourself this question, or maybe a family member or friend has asked about your driving. Getting older doesn't make you a bad driver. But you should know there are changes that may affect driving skills over time.

Your Body

As you age, your joints may get stiff, and your muscles may weaken. This can make it harder to turn your head to look back, turn the steering wheel quickly, or brake safely.

What you can do:

- ◆ See your doctor if you think that pain or stiffness gets in the way of your driving.

- ◆ If possible, drive a car with automatic transmission, power steering, power brakes, and large mirrors.
- ◆ Be physically active or exercise to keep and even improve your strength and flexibility.

Your Vision

Your eyesight may change as you get older. At night, you may have trouble seeing things clearly. Glare can also be a problem—from oncoming headlights, street lights, or the sun. It might be harder to see people, things, and movements outside your direct line of sight. It may take you longer to read street or traffic signs or even recognize familiar places. Eye diseases, such as glaucoma, cataracts, and macular degeneration, as well as some medicines, may also change your vision.

What you can do:

- ◆ Have your vision checked every 2 to 4 years if you are age 40 to 64 and every 1 to 2 years if you are 65 or older, as recommended by the American Academy of Ophthalmology. There are many vision problems your doctor can treat.

- ◆ Talk to your eye doctor if you can't see well enough to drive because you have a cataract. You might need surgery to remove the cataract.
- ◆ If you need glasses to see far away while driving, make sure your prescription is correct. And always wear them when you are driving.
- ◆ Cut back on night driving if you are having trouble seeing in the dark.

Your Hearing

Your hearing may change, making it harder to notice horns, sirens, or noises from your own car. That can be a problem because these sounds warn you when you may need to pull over or get out of the way. It is important that you hear them.

What you can do:

- ◆ Have your hearing checked. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association recommends doing this every 3 years after age 50. Your doctor can treat some hearing problems.
- ◆ Get a hearing aid to help—don't forget to use it when you drive.
- ◆ Try to keep the inside of the car as quiet as possible while driving.

- ◆ Pay attention to the warning lights on the dashboard. They may let you know when something is wrong with your car.

Your Reactions

In order to drive safely, you should be able to react quickly to other cars and people on the road. You need to be able to make decisions and to remember what to do. Being able to make quick decisions while driving is important so you can avoid accidents and stay safe. Changes over time might slow how fast you react. You may find that your reflexes are getting slower. Stiff joints or weak muscles can make it harder to move quickly. Your attention span may be shorter. Or, it might be harder for you to do two things at the same time.

What you can do:

- ◆ Leave more space between you and the car in front of you.
- ◆ Start braking early when you need to stop.
- ◆ Avoid high traffic areas when you can.
- ◆ If you must drive on a fast-moving highway, drive in the right-hand lane. Traffic moves more slowly

there. This might give you more time to make safe driving decisions.

- ◆ Take a defensive driving course. AARP, American Automobile Association (AAA), or your car insurance company can help you find a class near you.
- ◆ Be aware of how your body and mind might be changing, and talk to your doctor about any concerns.

Your Health

Some health problems can make it harder for people of any age to drive safely. But other conditions that are more common as you get older can also make driving difficult. For example, Parkinson's disease, stroke, and arthritis can interfere with your driving abilities. At some point, someone with health problems may feel that he or she is no longer a good driver and may decide to stop driving.

People with illnesses like Alzheimer's disease (AD) or other types of dementia may forget how to drive safely. They also may forget how to find a familiar place like the grocery store or even home. In the early stages of AD, some people are able to keep driving safely for a while. But, as memory and decision-making



skills worsen, driving will be affected. If you have dementia, you might not be able to tell that you are having driving problems. Family and friends may give you feedback about your driving. Doctors can help you decide whether it's safe to keep driving.

What you can do:

- ◆ Tell a family member or your doctor if you become confused while driving.

Your Medications

Do you take any medicines that make you feel drowsy, lightheaded, or less alert than usual? Medications can have side effects. People tend to take more medicines as they age, so pay attention to how these drugs may affect your driving.

What you can do:

- ◆ Read the medicine labels carefully, and pay attention to any warnings.
- ◆ Make a list of all your medicines, and talk to a doctor or pharmacist about how they may affect your driving.
- ◆ Don't drive if you feel lightheaded or drowsy.

Are You A Safe Driver?

Maybe you already know that driving at night, on the highway, or in bad weather is a problem for you. Older drivers can also have problems when yielding the right of way, turning (especially making left turns), changing lanes, passing, and using expressway ramps.

What you can do:

- ◆ When in doubt, don't go out. Bad weather like rain or snow can make it hard for anyone to drive. Try to wait until the weather is better, or use buses, taxis, or other transportation services available in your community.
- ◆ Look for different routes that can help you avoid places where driving can be a problem. Left turns can be quite dangerous because you have to check so many things at the same time. You could plan routes to where you want to go so that you only need to make right turns.
- ◆ Have your driving skills checked. There are driving programs and clinics that can test your driving and also make suggestions about improving your driving skills.

- ◆ Update your driving skills by taking a driving refresher course. (*Hint: Some car insurance companies may lower your bill when you pass this type of class.*)

Is It Time To Give Up Driving?

We all age differently. For this reason, there is no way to set one age when everyone should stop driving. So, how do you know if you should stop? To help you decide, ask yourself:

- ◆ Do other drivers often honk at me?
- ◆ Have I had some accidents, even if they are only “fender benders”?
- ◆ Do I get lost, even on roads I know?
- ◆ Do cars or people walking seem to appear out of nowhere?
- ◆ Have family, friends, or my doctor said they are worried about my driving?
- ◆ Am I driving less these days because I am not as sure about my driving as I used to be?
- ◆ Do I have trouble staying in my lane?
- ◆ Do I have trouble moving my foot between the gas and the brake pedals, or do I confuse the two?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, it may be time to think about whether or not you are still a safe driver.

How Will You Get Around?

Are you worried that, if you stop driving, you won't be able to do the things you want and need to do? You're not alone. Many people have this concern, but there may be more ways to get around than you think. For example, some areas offer free or low-cost bus or taxi service for older people. Some communities also have carpools that you can join without a car. Religious and civic groups sometimes have volunteers who will drive you where you want to go. Your local Area Agency on Aging can help you find services in your area. Call 800-677-1116, or go to www.eldercare.gov to find the nearest Area Agency on Aging.

You can also think about taking taxis. Sound pricey? Don't forget—it costs a lot to own a car. If you don't have to buy a car or pay for insurance, maintenance, gas, oil, or other car expenses, then you may be able to afford to take taxis or other public transportation. You can also help buy gas for friends or family who give you rides.

More Tips for Safe Driving

Planning before you leave:

- ◆ Plan to drive on streets you know.
- ◆ Limit your trips to places that are easy to get to and close to home.
- ◆ Take roads that will avoid risky spots like ramps and left turns.
- ◆ Add extra time for travel if driving conditions are bad.
- ◆ Don't drive when you are stressed or tired.

While you are driving:

- ◆ Always wear your seat belt.
- ◆ Stay off the cell phone.
- ◆ Avoid distractions such as eating, listening to the radio, or having conversations.
- ◆ Make sure there is enough space behind your car. (*Hint: If someone follows you too closely, slow down and pull over if needed to let that person pass you.*)
- ◆ Use your window defrosters to keep both the front and back windows clear.
- ◆ Keep your headlights on at all times.

Car safety:

- ◆ Drive a car with air bags.
- ◆ Check your windshield wiper blades often and replace them when needed.
- ◆ Keep your headlights clean and aimed in the right direction.
- ◆ Think about getting hand controls for both the gas and brake pedals if you have leg problems.

For More Information

Making decisions about your driving skills is hard, but it is important to find the safest option for you and the others who share the road with you. Here are some helpful Federal and non-Federal resources:

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

607 14th Street, NW, Suite 201

Washington, DC 20005

202-638-5944

www.seniordrivers.org

AARP

601 E Street, NW

Washington, DC 20049

202-434-2277

888-687-2277 (toll-free)

www.aarp.org

Administration on Aging

Washington, DC 20201

202-619-0724

www.aoa.gov

American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators

4301 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 400

Arlington, VA 22203

703-522-4200

www.granddriver.info

Federal Highway Administration

Office of Safety - HSST

1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE

Washington, DC 20590

202-366-6836

safety.fhwa.dot.gov

The Hartford

Hartford Plaza

690 Asylum Avenue

Hartford, CT 06115

860-547-5000

www.thehartford.com/alzheimers

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

800-222-2225 (toll-free)

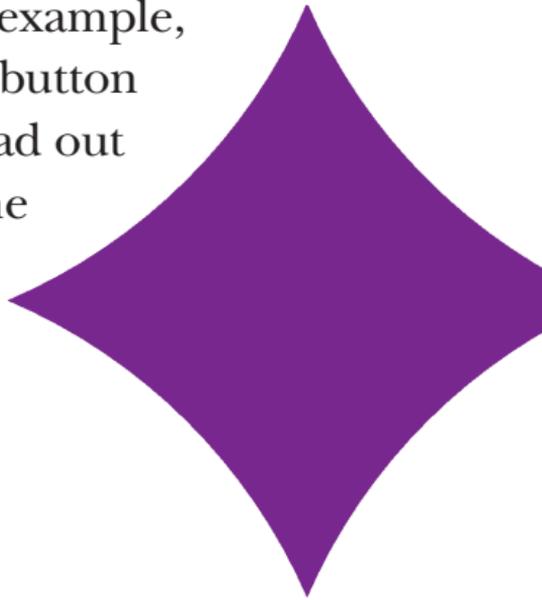
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from the NIA, go to *www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation*.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

National Institutes of Health
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