

The Older Driver Dilemma

In America, driving a vehicle is not just a way to get from one place to another. It frequently means something about who we are and how we conduct our lives. If we lose the ability to drive, we're losing more than just transportation. So it is well worth investing the time and energy to maintain and strengthen our driving skills.

There are a number of ways that we can support older adults in maintaining these skills and help them make adjustments to accommodate changes in their physical abilities. Law enforcement is key in all aspects of this, as we are the ones who may witness the worst consequences of unsafe driving first-hand.

U.S. Life Expectancy

Because of advances in medical technology and our ability to treat disease, life expectancy in the U.S. climbs each year. By 2040, the U.S. Census Bureau expects that we will be living well into our 80s.

A longer life expectancy sounds good, until you begin to think about what additional needs you'll have as you age. Do you have the retirement funds for 10-15 additional years? Who will drive you around if you lose or give up your driving privileges earlier than you expect? What about your family members who might be reaching this stage in their life? Will you drive them around? Will you help find transportation if they can't drive anymore?

Medical Issues that Affect Driving

Cataracts

Having a cataract can make it harder to see the road, street signs, other cars, and people walking because a cataract clouds the eye's lens. Among the signs of a cataract:

- objects look blurry;
- things are more difficult to see in bright light;
- headlight glare is more intense;
- colors look faded;
- night vision is worse; and
- double-vision may be present

Having a cataract also can mean that you need to change your eyeglasses or contact lenses more often. Eye care professionals may be able to make a small change in eyeglass prescriptions, or might suggest corrective surgery.

Macular Degeneration

Macular degeneration can distort central vision and can lead to loss of sharp vision. Macular degeneration also can make it difficult to see road signs, traffic, and people walking, cars in front of you, and will usually affect your ability to drive safely.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma can cause partial vision loss or total blindness. It usually affects your peripheral vision (the part of your eyesight that lets you see things out of the corner of your eye). Because glaucoma often affects your peripheral vision, individuals may not be aware of their vision losses until its advanced stages, when substantial changes in vision have occurred. If you have glaucoma and you drive, you may not see other cars, bicyclists, or pedestrians that are outside of your central field of view.

Stroke

Stroke occurs when the blood supply is cut off from a part of the brain. This hurts the brain cells, and can cause you not to be able to speak, to think or see clearly, or to control your body. Stroke may cause temporary or permanent weakness or paralysis on one side of the body. If you have had a stroke and you try to drive, you may:

- have trouble turning the steering wheel or applying the brake;
- become easily frustrated or confused while driving;
- drift across lane markings, into other lanes; and
- have difficulty thinking clearly about the traffic around you.

Most stroke survivors can return to independent, safe driving. But it depends on where in your brain the stroke took place and how much damage the stroke caused. Until the full extent of your stroke is known, there is no way to tell if and when you will be able to return to driving.

Arthritis

Having arthritis can make your joints swollen and stiff, which can limit how far you can bend or move your shoulders, hands, head and neck. This can make it harder to grasp or turn the steering wheel, apply the brake and gas pedals, put on your safety belt or look over your shoulder to check your blind spot.

As a result, arthritis can make it harder for you to drive safely. If arthritis affects your hips, knees, ankles or feet, you also may have difficulty getting in and out of your car.

Medications

While most medications don't affect driving ability, some prescription and over-the-counter medicines can cause reactions that may make it unsafe to drive.

These reactions may include:

- drowsiness
- blurred vision
- dizziness & fainting
- slowed movement
- inability to focus or pay attention
- nausea
- excitability

Driving while on these types of medications can also be a legal issue, since we all know that a driver can be ticketed or arrested for driving under the influence of some medications.

Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's disease can cause your arms, hands, or legs to shake – even when you are relaxed. It also can make it harder for you to keep your balance, or start to move when you have been still. If you have Parkinson's and you try to drive, you may not be able to:

- react quickly to a road hazard;
- turn the steering wheel; or
- use the gas pedal or push down the brake.

Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea is a condition in which breathing is interrupted during sleep. This results in a decrease in the oxygen level in your blood. Your body reacts by partially or completely awakening each time you stop breathing. This may occur many times over the course of the night. As a result, you do not get the necessary deep sleep you need.

People with untreated sleep apnea often wake up feeling sleepy and remain sleepy throughout the day, so it also affects how you function during the day. Untreated sleep apnea can make it difficult for you to stay awake, to focus your eyes, to remain alert and to react quickly to driving situations. If you are very tired or find yourself falling asleep while at work or at home, you should not drive.

Many sleep apnea patients say they never fall asleep while driving. That may be true. But remember, you don't have to fall asleep to have a crash. You simply have to be inattentive or not sharp – and with untreated sleep apnea, you are not as sharp as you should be.

CarFit

CarFit is an educational program that “fits” older adults to their vehicles. The CarFit program also provides information and materials on community-specific resources that could enhance their safety as drivers, and increase their mobility in the community. The program is designed to help older drivers find out how well they currently fit their personal vehicle, to highlight actions they can take to improve their fit, and to promote conversations about driver safety and community mobility. A proper fit in one's personal vehicle can greatly increase not only the driver's safety but also the safety of others.

CarFit was pilot tested in 10 cities in the spring of 2005 with more than 300 older driver participants. Based on findings from the CarFit checklists completed at the events and follow-up surveys of participants, the program appears to be highly effective on multiple fronts. Some of the results show:

...over one-third (37%) had at least one critical safety issue needing addressed.

...one in ten (10%) were seated too close to the steering wheel.

...approximately 20% did not have a line of sight at least 3" over the steering wheel.

In addition, the vast majority of those responding to the survey indicated that as a result of having gone through the CarFit event, they made a change to improve the fit of their vehicle, their use of safety features in their vehicle and/or their willingness to discuss their driving with family and/or health care providers.

Why is CarFit important?

Older drivers are often the safest drivers in that they are more likely to wear their seatbelts, and less likely to speed or drink and drive. However, older drivers are more likely to be killed or seriously injured when a crash does occur due to the greater fragility of their aging bodies.

Driver safety programs improve adult driver safety by addressing cognitive abilities and skills, however, older drivers can also improve their safety by ensuring their cars are properly adjusted for them. A proper fit in one's car can greatly increase not only the driver's safety but also the safety of others.

How is a CarFit check completed?

At a CarFit event, a team of trained technicians and/or health professionals work with each participant to ensure they "fit" their vehicle properly for maximum comfort and safety. A CarFit check takes approximately 20 minutes to complete.