DRIVING
What’s Normal, What’s Not?
Part 1 of a Series

For older people driving represents independence. A car is a source of freedom and pride that enables a person to go when and where he or she wants. To drive safely, a person must have good vision and hearing, be able to think and react quickly, and have the strength and ability to control the vehicle. A person’s age, in and of itself, is not an indicator of whether he or she is safe or unsafe to drive. However, there are a few common age-related challenges to be aware of including:

- FUNCTIONAL ABILITY – Reduced strength, slower reflexes, and reduced movement of the neck and body often cause older people to react more slowly to traffic signs/signals, other vehicles, potential hazards, etc.
- VISION – Changes in eyesight often lead to reduced peripheral vision, and difficulty judging distances and seeing contrasts – especially at night.
- SITUATIONAL – Unexpected situations such as a detour, a flat tire, being involved in an accident, and weather conditions can make it difficult for a person to cope.

Changes in health cause many people to voluntarily or involuntarily stop driving. An illness can force a person to give up driving for his or her own safety as well as that of passengers, other drivers and pedestrians. With medical conditions such as arthritis and stroke, a person’s limitations may be apparent. However, with dementia, diabetes and other conditions, limitations may be less obvious. A variety of other factors including emotions (e.g. anger, depression), fatigue, alcohol, and medications can also impair a person’s driving.

Frequently people regard driving as a right. However driving is not a right, it is a privilege. As people age, many choose to limit their driving or stop driving all together. While many people voluntarily stop driving each year, others overestimate their abilities or deny their limitations and continue to drive, even though they may be unsafe drivers. Some will even go to great lengths to hide their impairments, as they fear losing the privilege to drive.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), less than 10% of all drivers are age 70 and older, however, each year they account for 16% of all pedestrian deaths and 12% of all traffic deaths.

Where a person lives is often a predictor of driving status. People who live in a retirement community have less of a need or incentive to drive. Source: Carr (2006)
Regardless of age or gender, older people tend to drive fewer miles than younger drivers do. They are also more likely to limit their driving to when conditions are the safest. For example, older drivers tend to drive on familiar roads, avoid highways and busy traffic conditions, and avoid driving in certain weather conditions and at night. While these type of avoidance strategies are often viewed as positive, they do not eliminate the risk of an accident or injury. According to the NHTSA, of traffic deaths involving older drivers, 81% occurred during the daytime and 74% involved a second vehicle.

Just because a person has a valid driver’s license does not mean he or she is actually driving. Research findings indicate that of men 85 years of age and older, 75% had a license, however, of those only about 50% actually drove. For women aged 85 and older, an estimated 26% had a driver’s license and about 20% drove.

While the hope is that people will voluntarily stop driving when appropriate, the need for independence can make the decision difficult. Driving is a concern that many families prefer not to discuss. However, it is often family and friends who get involved because a loved one may be unable or unwilling to make that decision to stop driving.

When family or friends express concern about a loved one’s driving; there is no telling how a person may react. Some people will appreciate the comments as the concerns may reinforce what is already known. Others may quickly become defensive and argumentative. This mini-series provides information, resources, and strategies to help individuals and family understand and address driving concerns.

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