Cognitive (thinking) and physical changes that limit a person’s ability to drive safely can be the result of the normal aging process or an illness/disease. For some people changes may not be noticeable as they occur gradually over time. For others, the changes may appear suddenly and be obvious.

**COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS** affect a person’s memory, judgment, reasoning, decision-making skills, and his or her ability to concentrate.

- **Causes & Challenges:** Medical conditions such as dementia, vitamin deficiency, sensory deficits, and depression often lead to cognitive change. Reactions to medications and alcohol also cause changes in the way a person thinks and reasons. A person experiencing any type of cognitive impairment may rely on family or friends to take the lead in activities, as he or she may be unable or unwilling to recognize his or her own limitations.

- **Changes:** There are no set rules as to when a person with cognitive impairment may need to stop driving. *(Contact your health care provider(s) and the Alzheimer’s Association for information and guidance specific to your situation.)* Some people with minor impairments may be okay to continue driving, while others are not. A person should not drive when he or she feels drowsy or is otherwise impaired. To help decrease anxiety and focus on the driving activity, older people are advised to take precautionary measures including:
  - Self-regulate driving (e.g., avoiding unfamiliar routes, highways, rush hour traffic).
  - Avoid drinking and driving – even one drink can impair an older person.
  - Review medications for potential effects.
  - Have a cell phone and clearly printed directions in case of emergency.
  - Make sure family or friends know the destination and expected arrival time.

**PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENTS** affect a person’s strength, function, energy and ability to react quickly.

- **Causes & Challenges:** Changes in posture and reduced range of motion can make it challenging to turn one’s head or body adequately to see to the sides or behind the car. Chronic illnesses, reduced strength, and changes in hearing and vision can make driving both difficult and dangerous. People may not realize physical changes as the changes often occur gradually over time. People who have functional limitations due to chronic illness and physical problems are more likely to experience car crashes. Research findings indicate there may be a “window of opportunity” for intervention with those people who have chronic medical conditions, so that they may be able to drive longer and more safely. *(Wang, 2004)*
Changes: Depending on the type of challenges a person may be facing, there are a number of changes he or she can make to reduce driving risks. The following are ideas to help deal with changes due to one’s vision, hearing and body flexibility.

VISION changes can be the result of chronic eye problems such as cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, or complications from diabetes. Things to know about vision include:
- Daytime driving in moderate light conditions is the easiest on the eyes.
- Sunglasses help to protect a person’s eyes from glare and bright daylight.
- Night driving makes it difficult for people to judge distances and cope with glare from the headlights of on-coming traffic.
- Rain, snow, and damp roads make it difficult to see the road.
- An annual vision evaluation is recommended for older drivers.

HEARING changes occur due to natural aging and illness. Tips to enhance hearing ability are:
- Turn off the radio.
- Ask passengers to limit conversations that are not essential to the drive.
- Open the window a bit in order to hear emergency vehicles more easily.

BODY FLEXIBILITY and range of motion in the neck, arms and legs, are important in order to see around and behind the car and to react quickly. Strength is also important to turn the steering wheel easily or to move from the gas pedal to the brake pedal with ease.
- Physical activity and exercises may help maintain strength and flexibility.
- Physical or occupational therapy may help to increase range of motion.
- Oversized or wide-angle mirrors may help increase the visual field.

If you suspect any type of impairment, let your loved one know of your concerns and encourage him or her to stop driving. In addition, encourage your loved one to speak with his or her primary health care provider and undergo an assessment. Often there are exercises, therapies and other treatments that can help a person sharpen his or her driving skills.

The Center for Aging with Dignity offers the Driving Series as a community service. We are devoted to keeping people "SAFE After 60" by advocating for and advancing best-practice programs on the safety and mistreatment of older people. (D4-July '11) Copyright © 2006-2011 Charles Puchta – University of Cincinnati. DISCLAIMER – This publication is designed to raise health awareness and is not intended to replace the advice of health care professionals.

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