

How Do You Tell Mom or Dad It's No Longer Safe For Them To Drive?

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I.I.I. Offers Tips On How To Talk To Loved Ones About Retiring From Driving

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WASHINGTON, DC, APRIL 4, 2005 - Most older drivers believe that they will know when they should stop driving. But giving up the car keys, along with one's independence and the many benefits of owning a car, is often one of the most difficult decisions an older person must make.

While driving skills vary from one elderly person to another, there are physical and mental changes that accompany aging which can diminish the abilities of elderly drivers. These can include a slowdown in reflexes, muscle strength and agility; vision and hearing impairments; drowsiness due to medications; and a reduction in alertness.

"Many elderly drivers adjust their driving habits as their abilities diminish," says Carolyn Gorman, vice president of the Insurance Information Institute. "They drive fewer miles, avoid complex intersections and stay off interstate highways. But some older drivers are unwilling to make the necessary changes, endangering the lives of themselves - and others," she said. "We know that based on per-miles driven, crash rates for seniors are far worse than any other age group except for the youngest teens."

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), in 2002 there were 19.9 million licensed drivers age 70 and older in the U.S., yet they accounted for 12% of traffic fatalities, 12% of all vehicle occupant fatalities and 16 % of pedestrian fatalities. Collision rates per mile driven increase after age 70 and increase more rapidly after age 80.

Signs that it Might be Time to Retire From Driving

Caretakers should watch for decisive signs of decline in the elderly person's driving abilities such as:

- Drives at inappropriate speeds; responds slowly or doesn't notice other drivers or pedestrians.
- Fails to yield to other cars or pedestrians who have the right-of-way.
- Ignores street signs and traffic lights.
- Fails to judge distances between cars correctly.
- Becomes easily distracted; appears drowsy, confused or frightened.
- Has one or more near-accidents.
- Drifts between lanes or bumps into curbs.
- Drives without headlights on.
- Has difficulty with glare from oncoming headlights, streetlights, or other bright objects.
- Has difficulty turning their head, neck, shoulders or body while driving or parking.

- Ignores signs of auto mechanical problems such as low-inflated tires (a frequent cause of accidents).
- Not strong enough to turn the wheel quickly in an emergency situation.
- Gets lost repeatedly, even in familiar areas.

What Can a Caregiver Do?

Numerous states have instituted more stringent license renewal policies for elderly drivers such as more frequent and in-person renewals, eye tests, and driving tests upon reaching a designated age. But for those senior drivers who live in states that do not have this kind of testing, caregivers should consider the following:

- Suggest yearly eye and hearing exams. Poor vision, such as cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration can reduce vision or limit visual fields. Poor hearing will prevent the elderly from hearing a siren, car horn or pedestrian. Use of hearing aids and other devices should be considered.
- Review medical conditions and speak to a loved one's doctor. Certain medicines can cause drowsiness or mental confusion. Drugs prescribed for insomnia and anxiety, for example, can increase the crash risk among drivers who take them. If you suspect dementia or Alzheimer's, have your loved one checked by a doctor. Signs of Alzheimer's can include aggression - something that is extremely dangerous to other drivers and pedestrians. Work jointly with your loved one's doctor to encourage them to stop driving.
- Suggest a driving test and refresher course. A driver rehabilitation specialist can assess your loved one's driving safety through an office exam and driving test. Ask your loved one's doctor for a referral or contact the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (www.driver-ed.org.) Your state's Department of Motor Vehicles may also offer driving tests. It's important that senior drivers stay proactively involved in keeping their driving skills sharp. That's why, in many states, insurance companies offer an auto insurance discount for mature drivers if a person meets a given age criteria and has taken an approved mature driver safety course. Courses and informative pamphlets are available from the AARP, AAA and the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

"Involve your parent or loved one in the decision to adjust or stop their driving," says Gorman. "Suggest they avoid long distance driving, night driving or expressway driving. Encourage them to leave plenty of time to get where they are going and not to drive alone."

If you suspect that your loved one should stop driving altogether, the Insurance Information Institute has these tips to offer:

- Tell your loved one you are concerned and give specific reasons. Ask if he or she shares your concerns. Provide examples of recent fender benders, getting lost or running stop signs. Don't bring up these issues in the car. Wait until you have his or her full attention.
- Create a transportation plan. It's easier for people to give up driving if they have identified alternative ride options. Many cities offer special discounts for seniors on buses and trains, and senior centers and community service agencies often provide special transportation alternatives. Family and friends can take turns driving them where they need to go. Some families set up accounts to pay for their loved one's transportation needs through a cab service. Remind elderly drivers that owning an auto is expensive, including the annual cost for fuel, maintenance and insurance.
- Realize that your loved one may become upset or defensive. After all, driving is important for independence and self-esteem. If your loved one is unwilling to talk, don't give up. Your continued concern and support may help him or her feel more comfortable with this topic.

If you feel strongly that your parent or family member cannot drive safely and will not stop, consider contacting the local Department of Motor Vehicles and report your concerns. Depending upon state regulations and your senior's disabilities, it may be illegal for them to continue to drive. The DMV may do nothing more than send a letter, but this might help convince your parent to stop.

Other Things to Consider:

Caregivers should also make sure that the parent or family member has adequate auto liability insurance and that coverage doesn't lapse.

"Too often, parents have either too little insurance or may forget to make an insurance payment," says Gorman. "Sadly, if they are involved in a serious auto accident, they could lose everything they've worked so hard for their entire lives."

For more information on older drivers, visit the Insurance Information Institute's web site at www.iii.org.

Other useful information is available on the following web sites: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety at www.aaafoundation.org/home; Administration on Aging, Department of Health and Human Services at www.aoa.dhhs.gov; American Association of Retired Persons at www.aarp.org; American Medical Association at www.ama-assn.org; The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety at www.iihs.org; and the National Traffic Safety Administration at www.nhtsa.dot.gov.

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NOTABLE ELDERLY DRIVER ACCIDENTS

An elderly driver and his passenger were killed February 7, 2005 in Grass Valley, California, after they drove onto Highway 49 in the wrong direction and slammed into two oncoming vehicles.

George Keeler, 87, of Granite Bay, and his 86-year-old passenger, Laura Gleaves, of Auburn, were pronounced dead at the scene by California Highway Patrol officers. The collision occurred at about 4:20 p.m. on Highway 49 between Empire Street and McKnight Way. Keeler reportedly was driving his Ford Ranger pickup truck east on Highway 20 and was attempting to enter Highway 49 and head south. He apparently missed the southbound on-ramp and instead entered the freeway using the northbound off-ramp.

"There were lots of vehicles that saw him and swerved around him," CHP Sgt. Dee Lavrador said. "They honked their horns and he wasn't paying attention."

Keeler sped up to between 50 and 60 mph, according to the CHP. At the same time, Margaret Janes, 24, of Nevada City, was driving her 1997 Suzuki Sidekick north at about 60 mph. After Janes saw the Ford Ranger, she slammed on the brakes and swerved left to try and get around the pickup.

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In January 2005, a husband and wife were trapped under a car after an 88-year-old driver backed over them in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart in Pembroke Pines, Florida. Police said Able Pachon, 68, and Josefina Pachon, 65, visiting from Colombia, were walking outside the Wal-Mart when Marie Miller, 88, of Pembroke Pines, backed her 1988 Toyota Cressida over them, critically injuring them. The Toyota then hit a parked Ford Mustang, which hit a Jeep Liberty next to it. Neither car was occupied. Armando Barrionuevo, 29, was loading groceries into his car outside the store at Pines Boulevard and Southwest 184th Avenue just after 3:30 p.m. when the accident happened nearby. He rushed to the Toyota, pulled Miller out and moved the gear shift from reverse to park. Then he tried to free the husband and wife who were trapped underneath.

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Tragedy struck a newly married couple on their honeymoon in Hawaii on May 29, 2004 when the wife was killed and seven people, including her husband, were injured in a traffic accident in Honolulu, local police

said.

The woman was identified as Hikari Ishiyama, 24, from Kusatsu, Shiga Prefecture. Her 29-year-old husband's name was not immediately available. The couple, who were married a few days ago, and six pedestrians, including two Japanese, were hit by a pickup that ran onto a sidewalk .

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A car driven by George Russell Weller, 87, struck and killed 10 people and injured 63 others at a farmers' market in Santa Monica on July 16, 2003. Santa Monica Police Chief James Butts Jr. said at a news conference that after a five-month investigation, authorities believe that Weller hit the gas pedal instead of the brake of his 1992 Buick LeSabre after a minor fender-bender at a nearby intersection, just before his vehicle careered three blocks through the crowded pedestrian market. The only reason his car eventually stopped, Butts said, was because a body trapped beneath the vehicle slowed it down.

"Mr. Weller was conscious throughout the collision sequence; no evidence exists that Mr. Weller attempted to take the car out of gear; there is no indication of braking throughout the entire collision sequence," Butts said.

[Back to top](#)