

# Age and Driving

## Safety Tips and Warning Signs for Older Drivers



For many of us, driving is a key aspect of maintaining our independence as we age. But it's normal for our driving abilities to change as we get older. By reducing risk factors and incorporating safe driving practices, you may be able to continue driving safely long into your senior years. Even if you find that you need to reduce your driving or give up the keys, it doesn't mean the end of your independence. Seeking alternative methods of transportation can offer health and social benefits, as well as a welcome change of pace to life.

## How does age affect your driving?

Everyone ages differently, so there is no arbitrary cutoff as to when someone should stop driving. However, older adults are more likely to receive traffic citations and get into accidents than younger drivers. What causes this increase? As we age, factors such as decreased vision, impaired hearing, slowed motor reflexes, and worsening health conditions can become a problem.

Aging also tends to result in a reduction of strength, coordination, and flexibility, which can impact your ability to safely control a car. For example:

- Neck pain or stiffness can make it harder to look over your shoulder.
- Leg pain can make it difficult to move your foot from the gas to the brake pedal.
- Diminished arm strength can make it hard to turn the steering wheel quickly and effectively.
- Your reaction times can slow down with age.
- You can lose the ability to effectively divide your attention between multiple activities.

You may have driven your entire life and take great pride in your safety record, but as you age, it is critical that you realize your driving ability can change. You may feel shocked or

overwhelmed at the prospect of losing some of your independence, but by keeping your mind open to new possibilities, you can still maintain an active, vibrant, and rewarding lifestyle without a car. You may even be able to prolong other aspects of your independence.

### Safety tips for older drivers

Aging does **not** automatically equal total loss of driving ability. There are many things you can do to continue driving safely, including modifying your car, altering the way you drive, and addressing any physical issues that can interfere with driving.

#### Stay on top of your health

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Regular check-ups are critical to keep you in the best possible driving shape.

**Get your eyes checked every year.** Make sure that corrective lenses are current. Keep the windshield, mirrors, and headlights clean, and turn the brightness up on the instrument panel on your dashboard.

**Have your hearing checked annually.** If you need hearing aids, make sure you wear them while driving. Be careful when opening car windows, though, as drafts can sometimes impair a hearing aid's effectiveness.

**Talk with a doctor** about how ailments or medications can affect your driving ability. For example, if you have glaucoma, tinted eyeglasses can help to reduce glare.

**Get plenty of sleep.** Getting enough sleep is essential to driving well. [Ensure that you're sleeping well](#) and talk with your doctor about the effect sleep medications may have on your driving.

#### Find the right car and any aids you need for safe driving

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If required, an occupational therapist or a certified driving rehabilitation specialist can prescribe equipment to make it easier to steer your car or to operate the foot pedals. Otherwise:

- Choose a vehicle with automatic transmission, power steering, and power brakes.
- Keep your car in good working condition with regularly scheduled maintenance.
- Be sure that windows and headlights are always clean.

#### Drive defensively

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In these days of smartphones, GPS devices, audiobooks, and digital music players, drivers are even more distracted than they used to be. This means you'll want to take extra steps to

drive safely by:

- Leaving adequate space for the car in front of you.
- Paying extra attention at intersections.
- Making sure you are driving consistent with the flow of traffic.
- Avoiding distractions while driving, such as talking on the phone, texting, or consulting a map or GPS.
- Allowing sufficient braking distance. Remember, if you double your speed—say from 30mph to 60mph—your braking distance does not become twice as long, it becomes four times as far, even more if the road is wet or icy.

## Know your limitations

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If a driving situation makes you uncomfortable, avoid it. Many of us voluntarily begin to make changes in our driving practices as we get older by:

- Driving only during daylight hours if seeing well at night is a problem.
- Staying off freeways and highways to avoid fast-moving traffic.
- Not driving in bad weather (rain, thunderstorms, snow, hail, ice).
- Planning the route before leaving to feel more confident and avoid getting lost.

## Listen to the concerns of others

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If relatives, friends, or others express concerns about your driving, it may be time to take a hard, honest look at your driving ability. Have a comprehensive driving evaluation performed by an occupational therapist. Brush up on your driving skills by taking a refresher course. Talk to your doctor about your ability to drive safely.

## Getting a professional evaluation

An occupational therapist or certified driver rehabilitation specialist can provide a comprehensive evaluation of the skills needed to drive and recommend car modifications or tools to keep someone driving as long as possible. Such an evaluation can also help diffuse accusations from family by providing a neutral third party perspective. You can ask your medical treatment team for a referral, or visit the websites listed in the Resources section below.

## Warning signs of unsafe driving

Sometimes signs of unsafe driving can come up gradually, or a recent change in health may make problems worse. Even if the individual warning signs seem minor, together they can

add up to a substantial risk. Keep an eye out for these signs:

- **Frequent close calls** (i.e., almost crashing), dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, and curbs.
- **Increased citations**, traffic tickets or “warnings” by traffic or law enforcement officers.
- **Trouble with the fundamentals of driving** such as making sudden lane changes, drifting into other lanes, and braking or accelerating suddenly without reason. Other examples include failing to use the turn signal, or keeping the signal on without changing lanes.
- **Eyesight problems** like not seeing traffic lights and street signs, or having to drive closer and closer to them to see them clearly.
- **Hearing problems** such as not hearing emergency sirens or horns honking.
- **Problems with memory** including missing exits that used to be second nature or getting lost frequently. While everyone has occasional lapses, if there’s an increasing pattern, it’s time to get evaluated by a doctor.
- **Problems with reflexes and range of motion** such as not reacting quickly enough if there’s a need to brake suddenly or quickly look back, confusing the gas and brake pedals, getting flustered while driving, or being quick to anger when behind the wheel.

## If you need to give up the keys

Adjusting to life without a car can be challenging at first. It’s normal to feel frustrated, angry, or irritable. You might even feel ashamed or worry that you are losing your independence. However, it takes a lot of courage to stop driving and put the safety of yourself and others first.

You may even find there are benefits to living without a car. Saving money on the cost of car ownership can pay for alternative transportation such as using a taxi or shuttle service. Walking more can improve your health. Not only is exercise good for your body—it can help improve your mind, mood, sleep, energy, and memory. Accepting rides from others can expand your social circle. Try offering a friend or neighbor money for gas, or trade off on other chores, such as cooking a meal in return for your friend driving. You may enjoy life far more by living it at a slower pace without the stress of driving.

The more alternatives you have to driving, the easier the adjustment will be. You want to make sure that you can get out not only for essentials like doctor’s appointments, but also for social visits and to maintain your hobbies and interests. Explore public transportation, ride sharing options, community shuttles for seniors, and taxi or mobile app services like Uber and Lyft.

This may also be a time to evaluate your living situation. If you’re in an isolated area with

few transportation options, consider moving to an area with more options, or investigate different [senior living options](#).

### **How to talk to a loved one about unsafe driving**

Driving safety can be a sensitive issue for older drivers. A driver's license signifies more than the ability to drive a car; it's a symbol of freedom and self-sufficiency.

If you find yourself in the position of talking to an older friend or family member about their driving, remember the following:

**Be respectful.** Driving is often an integral part of independence. At the same time, don't be intimidated or back down if you have a true concern.

**Give specific examples.** Instead of generalizations like "You can't drive safely anymore," outline specific concerns that you've noticed. For example: "You have a harder time turning your head than you used to," or "You braked suddenly at stop signs three times the last time we drove."

**Find strength in numbers.** If more than one family member or close friend has noticed, it's less likely to be taken as nagging. A loved one may also listen to a more impartial party, such as a doctor or driving specialist.

**Help find alternatives.** The person may be so used to driving that they have never considered alternatives. You can offer concrete help, such as researching transportation options or offering rides when possible.

**Understand the difficulty of the transition.** Your loved one may experience a profound sense of loss having given up the keys, and not being able to drive can lead to [isolation and depression](#). Try to help with the transition as much as possible. If it is safe, try slowly transitioning the senior out of driving to give them time to adjust. For example, your loved one may begin the transition by no longer driving at night or on the freeways, or by using a shuttle service to specific appointments, such as the doctor's.

### **When an older driver refuses to give up the keys**

Sometimes an older driver must be stopped from driving over their objections. You can make an anonymous report to your local DMV or licensing authority. Alternatively, you can take away the person's car keys, sell or disable the car, or enlist the local police to help.

## Recommended reading

[Red Flags for Medically Impaired Driving](#) - Medical conditions, acute events, and medications that can impact driving. (National Highway Traffic Safety Organization)

[We Need to Talk...Family Conversations with Older Drivers](#) (PDF) - Guide to talking to a senior about their driving (TheHartford.com)

[Drivers 65 Plus: Check Your Performance](#) (PDF) - A driving self-awareness quiz. (AAA)

[Before You Give Up the Keys Create a Roadmap for Transportation Independence](#) - (PDF) Practical tips on utilizing available resources. (Eldercare Locator)

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