

Safety and the Older Driver

Advanced age does not automatically mean problems with driving. Still, there are safety concerns for older drivers, particularly those over age 70. Drivers or family members may decide to seek alternatives to driving for transportation needs. Learn more about how to navigate this transition below.

Medical Conditions That Affect Driving

For older drivers, medical conditions or their treatments may affect the ability to drive safely. These include Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia; vision disorders, such as age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and glaucoma; and medication use.

- **Alzheimer's disease.** Over time, individuals with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia will likely begin to lose faculties vital for driving, including reflexes, coordination, reaction time, eyesight, hearing, judgment, and the ability to orient themselves.
- **Age-related macular degeneration (AMD).** AMD causes blurriness and blind spots in the middle of a person's field of vision. This results in dependence on peripheral vision, seeing things out of the corner of the eye while looking straight ahead. Peripheral vision often lacks sharpness and clarity.
- **Glaucoma.** Glaucoma is more likely to initially cause problems with peripheral vision. Drivers with peripheral vision loss may have trouble noticing traffic signs on the side of the road or seeing cars and pedestrians about to cross their path. As glaucoma progresses, central vision also becomes impaired.
- **Medications.** Medications may affect driving performance among older drivers. Many drugs have adverse side effects, such as drowsiness, dizziness, hazy vision, unsteadiness, fainting, and slowed reaction time. Common medications that may cause side effects include sleep aids, antidepressants, antihistamines for allergies and colds, and strong painkillers. Taking several different drugs together can be dangerous.

Actionable Steps to Take Today

- **Assess driving abilities.** Older drivers should frequently monitor their driving behavior.

Talk to your doctor if you get lost while driving, have trouble seeing signs in time to respond to them, have trouble pushing down gas or brake pedals, struggle to look over your shoulder, get dizzy or drowsy after taking medications, or get nervous driving in traffic or unfamiliar roads. Loved ones should also look for these signs in older drivers.

- **Check car safety and modifications.** National groups like AAA or AARP, CarFit, or local driving specialists can assess whether certain car features or accommodations can make driving your vehicle easier. Examples include:
 - covering steering wheels with fabric that helps arthritic hands
 - adding a pedal extension for hip problems
 - providing hand controls if needed
 - using convex or multifaceted mirrors to avoid missing “blind spots” to the side or back of the car
- **Refresh driving knowledge with a course.** Safety classes can help one learn how to compensate for age-related changes. The organizations mentioned above, the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists, and certain occupational specialists offer driver safety classes.
- **Create a transportation plan.** The National Institute on Aging recommends that older drivers, even those who are still competent drivers, create a plan for the future that explores other transportation options besides driving oneself. Finding alternatives to driving can help one feel more in control and independent after solo driving ends.

Guide to Handling the Situation for Caregivers

Wait until you have your loved one's full attention in a calm environment to discuss concerns about their driving. Use “I” statements like “I’m concerned about your safety when you drive,” rather than blanket statements like “You’re not a safe driver.” Acknowledge their feelings and note that while things will change, there are other ways to get around.

For drivers with Alzheimer's disease, caregivers can take steps such as showing a doctor's “no driving” note, asking a respected person to speak with them, hiding or disabling the car keys, or offering distractions. If needed, consider disabling the car, moving it, or selling it.

Even after retiring from driving, older adults should stay socially active and independent. Explore options like door-to-door shuttles, volunteer driver programs,

ride-share services like Uber or Lyft, and free or low-cost services from local organizations. Contact your local Area Agency on Aging or the Eldercare Locator (800-677-1116) for help finding transportation.

Seeking Outside Assistance

Social workers and geriatric care managers are two types of elder care professionals who can help people adjust to life after driving and provide needed services.

A **geriatric care manager** is a professional—usually a social worker, counselor, or nurse—who develops and implements plans to assist elders and their families with all aspects of long-term care.

Geriatric managers can help with two specific driving problems. First, in situations where the family has reached a stalemate, the manager may be able to convince the older person that it is time to stop driving. Second, a geriatric care manager can make arrangements for alternative forms of transportation and the delivery of goods and services to someone who is unable to drive. This can be especially useful to families who live far from their loved one and cannot be there on a daily basis yet want to make sure their relatives receive needed help and supplies.

For a referral to a geriatric care manager, contact the Aging Life Care Association (contact information listed below).

Social workers can assist in locating and coordinating transportation and community services as well as assessing social and emotional needs. For families dealing with Alzheimer's disease, there is the added challenge of arranging for increased care as the disease progresses. To find a qualified clinical social worker in your area, contact the National Association of Social Workers, your local hospital, or your Area Agency on Aging.

Driver Safety Resources

AARP Driver Safety Program

- www.aarp.org/auto/driver-safety
- 1-800-350-7025
- Find a directory of driver safety education classes and other information.

Aging Life Care Association

- Aginglifecare.org
- (520) 881-8008

- Helps families care for older relatives while promoting independence.

American Automobile Association (AAA)

- www.exchange.aaa.com/safety/senior-driver-safety-mobility/
- (202) 638-5944
- Includes free information for older drivers and their families.

American Occupational Therapy Association

- www.aota.org/olderdriver
- Search for a driver rehabilitation specialist in your area.

Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists

- www.aded.net
- 1-866-672-9466
- Search for certified driver rehabilitation specialists in your state.

Driving School Association of the Americas

- www.dsaa.org
- 1-800-270-DSAA (3722)
- Search a directory of driving schools by state and locality.

Eldercare Locator

- <https://eldercare.acl.gov>
- 1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)
- Connects older adults to transportation, services, and local Area Agencies on Aging. English and Spanish support available.

USAging

- www.usaging.org
- Supports aging in place with dignity and choice through local agencies.

National Aging and Disability Transportation Center

- www.nadtc.org
- 866-983-3222
- Promotes transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers.

National Institute on Aging, part of NIH

- www.nia.nih.gov/health/older-drivers
- Helpful tips on safe driving for older adults.

U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration

- <http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov>
- Access guides and handbooks focused on older driver safety.
- 202-366-4000

About BrightFocus Foundation

BrightFocus Foundation is at the forefront of brain and eye health, advancing early-stage, investigator-initiated research around the world. For more than 50 years, BrightFocus and its flagship programs—Alzheimer's Disease Research, Macular Degeneration Research, and National Glaucoma Research—have invested more than \$300 million in research grants, catalyzing thousands of scientific breakthroughs, life-enhancing treatments, and diagnostic tools. Our generous, growing community of donors fuels the drive and brilliance of scientists working around the world to save mind and sight. Learn more at brightfocus.org.

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