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Remaining a Safe Driver

At age 75, Sheila thinks she's a very good driver. And she wanted to stay that way. So she got her eyes and hearing checked to make sure she can see and hear well enough to drive safely. Then she signed up to take a driving course for older drivers at her local automobile club. Will all this effort guarantee Sheila's road safety?

As he was driving to the grocery store one day, 80-year-old Daniel ran over the curb and hit a trash can. His car was only scratched, and he was not hurt. But Daniel was scared because he almost hit a young woman waiting at the bus stop. He began to wonder if he should give up his driver's license. How will Daniel know when it's time for him to stop driving?

How Does Age Affect Driving?

More and more older drivers are on the roads these days. It's important to know that getting older doesn't automatically turn people into bad drivers. In fact, many people as they age will continue to be good, safe drivers. But there are changes that can affect driving skills that everyone needs to be aware of as they age.

Changes to Our Bodies:

Over time your joints may get stiff and your muscles weaken. It can be harder to move your head to look back, quickly turn the steering wheel, or safely hit the brakes.

Your eyesight and hearing may change, too. As you get older, you need more light to see things. Also, glare from the sun, oncoming headlights, or other street lights may trouble you more than before. The area you can see around you (called peripheral vision) may become narrower. The vision problems from eye diseases such as cataracts, macular degeneration, or glaucoma can also affect your driving ability.

You may also find that your reflexes are getting slower. Or, your attention span may shorten. Maybe it's harder for you to do two things at once. These are all normal changes, but they can affect your driving skills.

Some older people have conditions like Alzheimer's disease (AD) that change their thinking and behavior. People with AD may forget familiar routes or even how to drive safely. They become more likely to make driving mistakes, and they have more "close calls" than other drivers. However, people in the early stages of AD may be able to keep driving for a while. As the disease worsens, it will affect driving ability, which means caregiver need to be monitoring the ability level of their loved one. Doctors can help you decide whether it's safe for the person with AD to keep driving.

Other Health Changes:

While health problems can affect driving at any age, some occur more often as we get older. For example, arthritis, Parkinson's disease, and diabetes may make it harder to drive. People who are depressed may become distracted while driving. The effects of a stroke or even lack of sleep can also cause driving problems. Devices such as an automatic defibrillator or pacemaker might cause an irregular heartbeat or dizziness, which can make driving dangerous.

Medication Side Effects:

Some medicines can make it harder for you to drive safely. These medicines include sleep aids, anti-depression drugs, antihistamines for allergies and colds, strong pain killers, and diabetes medications. If you take one or more of these or other medicines, talk to your doctor about how they might affect your driving.

Am I A Safe Driver? Smart Driving Tips

Maybe you already know of some driving situations that are hard for you--nights, highways, rush hours, or bad weather. If so, try to change your driving habits to avoid them. Other hints? Older drivers are most at risk when yielding the right of way, turning (especially making left turns), backing up, changing lanes, passing, and using expressway ramps. Pay special attention at those times, or avoid situations involving some of those requirements.

Planning before you leave:

- Plan to drive on streets you know.
- Limit your trips to places that are not easy to get to and close to home.
- Take routes that let you avoid risky spots like ramps and left turns.
- Take secondary roads as opposed to highways - it may mean more time, but less stress.
- Add extra time for travel if driving conditions are bad.
- Don't drive when you are stressed or tired.
- Ask a friend or relative to accompany you, and perhaps even split driving responsibility for long distances.

While you are driving:

- Always wear your seat belt.
- Stay off the cell phone.
- Avoid distractions such as listening to the radio or having conversations.
- Leave a big space, at least two car lengths, between your car and the one in front of you. If you are driving at higher speeds or if the weather is bad, leave even more space between you and the next car.
- Make sure there is enough space behind you. (Hint: if someone follows you too closely, slow down so that the person will pass you.)
- Use your rear window defroster to keep the back window clear at all times.
- Keep your headlights on at all times.

Car safety:

- Drive a car with features that make driving easier, such as power steering, power brakes, automatic transmission, and large mirrors.
- Drive a car with air bags.
- Check your windshield wiper blades often and replace them when needed.
- Keep your headlights clean and aligned.
- Think about getting hand controls for the accelerator and brakes if you have leg problems.
- Participate in a local [Car Fit program](#) sponsored by AARP, AAA, and AOTA that checks how well a vehicle fits the person, and provides guidance on modifications to help you continue to drive safely.

Driving Skills:

- Take a driving refresher class every few years. (Hint: Some car insurance companies lower your bill when you pass this type of class. Check with AARP, AAA, or local private driving schools to find a class near you.)
- Drive routinely to keep up your driving skills. Women who routinely allow their spouse to do all of the driving, find it difficult to drive in the event of their husband's illness.
- People who have not been driving due to illness or surgery need to regain skills and abilities lost before
- Have your driving evaluated by a Certified Driving Rehabilitation Specialist using a simulation machine or an actual road test.

Is It Time to Give Up Driving?

We all age differently. For this reason, there is no way to say what age should be the upper limit for driving. So, how do you know if you should stop driving? To help you decide, ask:

- Do other drivers often honk at me?
- Have I had some accidents, even "fender benders"?
- Do I have scrapes on my bumpers from hitting things?
- Do I get lost, even on roads I know?
- Do cars or people walking seem to appear out of nowhere?
- Have family, friends, or my doctor said they are worried about my driving?
- Am I nervous about driving alone in the car?
- Am I driving less these days because I am not as sure about my driving as I used to be?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you should think seriously about whether or not you are still a safe driver. If you answered no to all these questions, don't forget to have your sight and hearing checked regularly, as well as pay attention to your muscle strength, coordination, flexibility, response and fatigue level. Talk to your doctor about any changes to your health that could affect your ability to drive safely.

How Will I Get Around?

You can stay active and do the things you like to do, even if you decide to give up driving. There may be more options for getting around than you think, and many

have options for accommodating wheelchairs. Some areas offer low-cost bus or taxi service for older people. Some also have carpools or other transportation on request. Religious and civic groups sometimes have volunteers who take seniors where they want to go for free or a small fee. Your local Agency on Aging has information about transportation services in your area.

If you do not have these services where you live, look into taking taxis. Too expensive, you think? Well, think about this: the AAA now estimates that the average cost of owning and running a car over \$9,500 a year, considering gas, insurance, personal property tax, maintenance, and repairs. So, by giving up your car, you might have as much as \$180 a week to use for taxis, buses, or to buy gas for friends and relatives who can drive you!

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