



Facts and Research

Seniors are safe drivers compared to other age groups, since they often reduce risk of injury by wearing safety belts, observing speed limits, and not drinking and driving. However, they are more likely to be injured or killed in traffic crashes due to age-related vulnerabilities, such as more fragile bones. Medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes and other illnesses also make it more difficult for older drivers to recover from any injuries. With the exception of teen drivers, seniors have the highest crash death rate per mile driven, even though they drive fewer miles than younger people.

Although Americans are healthier and living longer than ever before, seniors are outliving their ability to drive safely by an average of 7 to 10 years. Most older drivers recognize and avoid situations where their limitations put them at risk. They drive less after dark, during rush hour or in bad weather, and avoid difficult roads such as highways and intersections.

Here are more key facts about senior drivers:

- Fifty percent of the middle-aged population and 80 percent of people in their 70s suffer from arthritis, crippling inflammation of the joints, which makes turning, flexing and twisting painful.
- Weaker muscles, reduced flexibility and limited range of motion restrict senior drivers' ability to grip and turn the steering wheel, press the accelerator or brake, or reach to open doors and windows.
- More than 75 percent of drivers age 65 or older report using one or more medications, but less than one-third acknowledged awareness of the potential impact of the medications on driving performance.
- Per mile traveled, fatal crash rates increase beginning at age 75 and rise sharply after age 80. This is mainly due to increased risk of injury and medical complications, rather than an increased tendency to get into crashes.
- Since older drivers are more fragile, their fatality rates are 17 times higher than those of 25- to 64-year-olds.
- In 2009, 33 million licensed drivers were over age 65 – a 20 percent increase from 1999. And by the year 2030, 70 million Americans in the U.S. will be over age 65 – and 85 to 90 percent of them will be licensed to drive.

Planning Ahead

Because driving is closely tied to freedom and independence, acknowledging the possibility of one day being unable to drive is difficult for almost anybody. This is why it's important to prepare for a conversation on the subject.

Do your homework. Complete the following checklist before initiating a conversation with an older adult about driving.



- **Conduct a “ride-along” with the driver.** Join the driver as a passenger during several trips and note your thoughts and observations – both positive and negative. Try to ride with the driver at different times to get a good sense of driving performance under a variety of road conditions.
- **Consult those with special knowledge.** Discuss your concerns with a law enforcement officer, an elder-law attorney or a geriatrician about any concerns and seek advice tailored to your specific situation. Collect information about local options for a professional driving assessment and driver retraining courses.
- **Understand the older adult’s transportation needs.** Determine the purposes for the older adult’s driving. Consider medical appointments, social obligations, religious commitments, shopping and community activities. Doing so will help you to appreciate how important driving is to the senior driver and assist you in finding transportation alternatives.
- **Determine local transportation services.** Generate a list of different services available, the cost to use them, scheduling, phone numbers and so forth to share when you initiate the conversation about driving. Try taking trips on several of these services, so you understand how to use them and whether or not they are convenient and easy to use and access.

Write it all down. Once you’ve completed your research, organize the information. Use it to develop an action plan for your conversation. Then, after you have had a productive conversation, document the plan you and the older adult mutually agreed to pursue and review it together for accuracy.

Deal with Negative Reactions

Sometimes, an older driver’s fear of having to depend on others to get around will override your efforts to be caring and supportive. Alternatively, the older adult you’re trying to help might simply deny having any problems with driving despite a mountain of evidence suggesting otherwise.

If you find yourself dealing with negative reactions like these, review the following tips:

- **Do not become defensive.** Be a good listener and let the older adult express any feelings and emotions. This may help you to understand how and why the conversation has been upsetting.
- **Respond with empathetic phrases.** State, “I understand how this is upsetting,” or, “Let’s focus on what we can do to help keep you safe without limiting when and where you want to go.”
- **Do not lecture or demand that an older adult give up the keys.** The more you alienate your listener, the less you will be able to help.
- **Be objective.** Encourage the older adult to check skills and abilities needed for safe driving by taking a self-rating program or getting an assessment from a professional.
- **Work together to agree on a plan of action.** If you initiate the conversation early – before any problems exist – the transition from driver to passenger can be very gradual. It might begin with self-imposed restrictions on when or where the older adult chooses to drive. It may progress to building up a comfort level in using other forms of transportation before there’s a need to depend on them. This plan also could provide enough time to move the older adult’s residence, so there would be a very limited need to drive at all in the future.