

# How to Help the Older Driver

As experienced drivers grow older, changes in their vision, attention and physical abilities may cause them to drive less safely than they used to. Sometimes these changes happen so slowly that the drivers are not even aware that their driving safety is at risk.

If you have questions about a loved one's driving safety, here's what you can do to help him or her stay safe AND mobile.

## **Is your loved one a safe driver?**

If you have the chance, go for a ride with your loved one. Look for the following warning signs in his or her driving:

- Forgets to buckle up
- Does not obey stop signs or traffic lights
- Fails to yield the right of way
- Drives too slowly or too quickly
- Often gets lost, even on familiar routes
- Stops at a green light or at the wrong time
- Doesn't seem to notice other cars, walkers, or bike riders on the road
- Doesn't stay in his or her lane
- Is honked at or passed often
- Reacts slowly to driving situations
- Makes poor driving decisions

Other signs of unsafe driving include:

- Recent near misses or fender benders
- Recent tickets for moving violations
- Comments from passengers about close calls, near misses, or the driver not seeing other vehicles
- Recent increase in the car insurance premium

Riding with or following this person every once in a while is one way to keep track of his or her driving. Another way is to talk to this person's spouse or friends.

## **If you are concerned about your loved one's driving, what can you do?**

- Talk to your loved one. Say that you are concerned about his or her driving safety. Does he or she share your concern?
- Don't bring up your concerns in the car. It's dangerous to distract the driver! Wait until you have his or her full attention.
- Explain why you are concerned. Give specific reasons—for example, recent fender benders, getting lost, or running stops signs.
- Realize that your loved one may become upset or defensive. After all, driving is important for independence and self-esteem.
- If your loved one doesn't want to talk about driving at this time, bring it up again later. Your continued concern and support may help him or her feel more comfortable with this topic.
- Be a good listener. Take your loved one's concerns seriously.

**Help make plans for transportation.** When your loved one is ready to talk about his or her driving safety, you can work together to create plans for future safety.

- Make a formal agreement about driving. In this agreement, your loved one chooses a person to tell him or her when it is no longer safe to drive. This person then agrees to help your loved one make the transition to driving retirement. You can find a sample agreement in *At the Crossroads: A Guide to Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia & Driving*. Order a free copy by writing to: At the Crossroads Booklet, The Hartford, 200 Executive Boulevard, Southington, CT 06489.
- Help create a transportation plan (see the next column). Your loved one may rely less on driving if he or she has other ways to get around.
- **Encourage a visit to the doctor.** The doctor can check your loved one's medical history, list of medicines, and current health to see if any of these may be affecting his or her driving safety. The doctor can also provide treatment to help improve driving safety.
- **Encourage your loved one to take a driving test.** A drivers rehabilitation specialist (DRS) can assess your loved one's driving safety through an office exam and a driving test. The DRS can also teach special techniques or suggest special equipment to help him or her drive more safely. (To find a DRS in your area, ask your doctor for a referral or contact the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED). If a DRS is not available in your area, contact a local driving school or your state's Department of Motor Vehicles to see if they can do a driving test.

## **How to help when your loved one retires from driving.**

At some point, your loved one may need to stop driving for his or her own safety and the safety of others on the road. You or your loved one may come to the decision yourselves, or at the recommendation of the doctor, drivers rehabilitation specialist, driving instructor, or Department of Motor Vehicles. When someone close you retires from driving, there are several things you can do to make this easier for him or her:

Create a transportation plan. It's often easier for people to give up driving if they have other ways to get around. Help your loved one create a list of "tried-and-true" ride options. This list can include:

The names and phone numbers of friends and relatives who are willing to give rides, with the days and times they are available.

The phone number of a local cab company.

Which bus or train to take to get to a specific place. Try riding with your loved one the first time to help him or her feel more comfortable.

The phone number for a shuttle service. Call the community center and regional transit authority to see if they offer a door-to-door shuttle service for older passengers.

The names and phone numbers of volunteer drivers. Call the community center, church, or synagogue to see if they have a volunteer driver program.

If you need help finding other ride options, contact the Area Agency on Aging.

**If your loved one can't go shopping, help him or her shop from home.** Arrange for medicines and groceries to be delivered. Explore on-line ordering or subscribe to catalogs and “go shopping” at home. See which services make house calls—local hairdressers or barbers may be able to stop by for a home visit.

**Encourage social activities.** Visit with friends, time spent at the senior center, and volunteer work are important for one's health and well-being. When creating a transportation plan, don't forget to include rides to social activities. It's especially important for your loved one to maintain social ties and keep spirits high during this time of adjustment.

**Be there for your loved one.** Let your loved one know that he or she has your support. Offer help willingly and be a good listener. This is an emotionally difficult time, and it's important to show that you care.

### **Where can I get more help?**

Contact the following organizations if you need more help assessing your loved one's driving safety or creating a transportation plan.

**American Automobile Association (AAA)  
Foundation for Traffic Safety**  
1-800-993-7222

[www.aaafoundation.org](http://www.aaafoundation.org)

Call the toll-free number or visit the Web site to order free booklets on how to help an older driver.

**American Association of Retired Persons  
(AARP)**

1-888-227-7669

[www.aarp.org/drive](http://www.aarp.org/drive)

Visit the Web site to find safe driving tips, information on aging and driving, and details about the 55 ALIVE Drivers Safety Program—a classroom course for drivers age 50 and older. In this course, participants review driving skills

and learn tips to help them drive more safely. Call the toll-free number or visit the Web site above to find a class in your loved one's area.

### **Area Agency on Aging (AAA)**

Eldercare Locator: 1-800-677-1116

[www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov)

The local Area Agency on Aging can connect your loved one to services in the area, including ride programs, Meals-on-Wheels, home health services, and more. Call the Eldercare Locator or visit the Web site above to find the phone number for your loved one's local Area Agency on Aging.

### **Association for Drivers Rehabilitation Specialist (ADED)**

1-800-290-2344

[www.driver-ed.org](http://www.driver-ed.org) or [www.aded.net](http://www.aded.net)

Call the toll-free number or visit the Web site to find a driver rehabilitation specialist in your loved one's area.

### **Easter Seals**

1-312-726-7200

Easter Seal's Caregiver Transportation Toolkit includes a video, booklet, and list of helpful products and resources for family caregivers and volunteer drivers. To order the toolkit, call the number above, or write to: Easter Seals National Headquarters, 230 Monroe Street, Suite 1800, Chicago, IL 60606.

### **National Association of Private Geriatric Care Managers (NAPGCM)**

1-520-881-8008

[www.caremanager.org](http://www.caremanager.org)

A geriatric care manager can help older persons and their families arrange long-term care, including transportation services. Call the phone number or visit the Web site above to find a geriatric care manager in your loved one's area.