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# Safe Driving for Older Adults

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On this page:

- [What can change driving ability with age?](#)
- [Tips for older adults to drive safely.](#)
- [How to check and improve your driving skills](#)
- [Having the "talk" about driving](#)
- [Signs your loved one should no longer be driving](#)
- [Is it time for you to give up driving?](#)
- [How will you get around?](#)

While many older adults value the independence of driving, changes that happen with age may alter a person's ability to drive safely. You may notice driving becoming more difficult over time for yourself or for your loved ones. Changes in health, including medical conditions or injuries, also may impact a person's driving skills. Learn more about the different factors that can affect driving as you age and signs of when it may be time to stop driving.

## Sheila's Story

At age 78, Sheila thinks she's still a good driver, but this year, she's had one minor accident and several near misses. She's also noticed a few new dents on her car and doesn't know how they got there. Lately, her daughters have begun offering to drive her places that she normally goes to on her own. Sheila wants to keep driving as she gets older but is starting to wonder how she can stay safe behind the wheel.

## What can change driving ability with age?

Common health conditions and medication side effects may influence your driving skills.

- **Stiff joints and muscles.** As you age, your joints may get stiff, and your muscles may weaken. [Arthritis](#), which is common among older adults, might affect your ability to drive. These changes can make it harder to turn your head to look back, turn the steering wheel quickly, or brake safely. If [pain](#), stiffness, or arthritis seem to get in the way of your driving, talk with your doctor. Think about getting hand controls for both the gas and brake pedals if you have leg problems.
- **Trouble seeing.** Your [eyesight](#) can change as you get older. It might be harder to see people, things, and movement outside your direct line of sight. It may also take longer to read street or traffic signs or even recognize familiar places. At night, you may have trouble seeing things clearly. Glare from oncoming headlights or streetlights can be a problem. Depending on the time of day, the sun might be blinding. Eye diseases, such as glaucoma, cataracts, and macular degeneration, as well as some medicines, can also cause vision problems. If you are 60 or older, get a dilated eye exam from your eye doctor every one to two years. If you need glasses or contact lenses to see far away while driving, make sure your prescription is up to date and correct.
- **Trouble hearing.** As you grow older, your [hearing](#) can change, making it harder to notice horns, sirens, or even noises coming from your own car. These sounds warn you when you may need to pull over or get out of the way, or when there is a possible mechanical issue with your vehicle. Have your hearing checked at least every three years after age 50 or more frequently if you have had chronic exposure to loud noises or have other risk factors for hearing loss. Discuss your concerns with your doctor as there may be treatments that can help.
- **Medications.** Some [medicines](#) can make you feel drowsy, lightheaded, or less alert than usual, which can make driving unsafe. Some drugs include a warning about driving, but even those that do not might have a negative effect. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if any of your health problems or medications might make it unsafe for you to drive.
- **Slower reaction time and reflexes.** As you get older, your reflexes might get slower, and you might not react as quickly as you could in the past. Stiff joints or weak muscles also can make it harder to move quickly. Loss of feeling or tingling in your fingers and feet can make it difficult to steer or use the foot pedals.
- **Some medical conditions make it unsafe to drive.** The uncontrollable movements and loss of coordination and balance due to [Parkinson's disease](#) make it unsafe to drive. Similarly, many of the loss of control of limbs or other movement limitations following a [stroke](#) can mean it is no longer safe to drive.



## Dementia and driving

In the early stages of [Alzheimer's disease](#) or [other types of dementia](#), some people are able to keep driving. But, as

memory and decision-making skills get worse, they will likely need to stop.

People with dementia often do not know they are having driving problems. [Family and friends](#) need to monitor the person's driving ability and take action as soon as they observe a potential problem, such as forgetting how to find familiar places like the grocery store or even their home. Work with their health care team to let the person know it's no longer safe to keep driving.

Learn more about [driving safety and Alzheimer's disease](#).

## Tips for older adults to drive safely

Maybe you already know that driving at night or in rainy weather is a problem for you. Some older drivers also have problems with certain routes or driving on busy highways, for example. Consider these tips to help you make safe choices about driving:

- **Talk with your doctor.** If you have any concerns about your health and driving, see your doctor. Don't risk hurting yourself or others.
- **Be [physically active](#).** This will help you keep and even improve your [strength](#) and [flexibility](#), which may help your driving abilities.
- **Consider your car.** If possible, drive a car with automatic transmission, power steering, power brakes, and large mirrors. Newer cars come equipped with backup cameras, which can make parking and backing up easier, as well as other sensors that can alert a driver to a nearby object or vehicle before an accident occurs.
- **Take care of your eyes and ears.** Always wear your glasses or contact lenses if you need them to see clearly. If you use hearing aids, be sure to wear them while driving.
- **Avoid driving certain times of day.** Cut back on or stop driving at night if you have trouble seeing in the



[Read and share this infographic](#) to spread the word about how older adults

dark. Try to avoid driving during sunrise and sunset, when the sun can be directly in your line of vision.

can stay safe on the road.

- **Check in with yourself.** Don't drive if you feel lightheaded or drowsy. Be sure to check any warnings on your medications. Try to avoid driving when you are stressed or tired.
- **Don't crowd.** Leave ample space between your car and the car in front of you and start braking early when you need to stop.
- **Plan your timing.** Avoid heavy traffic areas or rush-hour driving when you can.
- **Plan your route.** Drive on streets you know and find a way to go that requires few or no left turns. Choose a route that avoids highways or other high-speed roadways. If you must drive on a fast-moving highway, drive in the right-hand lane, where traffic moves more slowly.
- **When in doubt, don't go out.** Bad weather, such as rain, ice, or snow, can make it hard for anyone to drive. Try to wait until the weather is better, or use buses, taxis, ridesharing services, or other alternatives.
- **Wear seat belts.** Always wear your seat belt and make sure your passengers wear theirs, too.
- **Limit distractions.** Eating, adjusting the radio, or chatting can all be distracting. If you use your cellphone while driving (for navigation, for example), use it hands-free and use voice activation when possible. Never type on your phone while driving.
- **Use window defrosters.** These will help keep windows and windshields clear.

## How to check and improve your driving skills

Are you concerned that your driving skills are declining or could be improved? Consider the following:

- Have your driving skills checked by a driving rehabilitation specialist, occupational therapist, or other trained professional. The [American Occupational Therapy Association](#) maintains a national database of driving specialists, or you can ask your state's Department of Motor Vehicles or your doctor to recommend someone who can test your driving skills. Note that there may be fees associated with these types of assessments.
- The American Automobile Association's (AAA) [RoadWise Driver Course](#) is designed to help older adults adjust to age-related physical changes to extend their safe driving career.
- Try an online self-assessment, [such as this one from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) (NHTSA), to gauge your abilities.
- Ask your family and friends for feedback about your driving, including any concerns.
- Take a driver safety course. Some car insurance companies may even lower your bill when you complete this type of class. Organizations such as [AARP](#) or your car insurance company can help you find a nearby resource.

## Signs your loved one should no longer be driving

Are you worried about an older family member or friend driving? It can be hard for some people to recognize or admit when it's no longer safe to drive. You might want to observe the person's driving skills or ask them to consider doing a self-assessment of their driving. If it's not possible to directly observe the person's driving, watch for these signs:

- Multiple vehicle crashes, near misses, or new dents or scrapes on the car
- Two or more traffic tickets or warnings within the last two years
- Increases in car insurance premiums because of driving issues
- Comments from neighbors or friends about erratic, unsafe, or aggressive driving
- Anxiety about driving at night
- Health issues that might affect driving, including problems with vision, hearing, and movement
- Complaints about the speed, sudden lane changes, or actions of other drivers

- Recommendations from a doctor to modify driving habits or quit driving entirely

## Having “the talk” about driving

Talking with an older person about his or her driving is often difficult. For many older adults, “giving up the keys” means a loss of freedom of choice and movement. Many people are afraid of being dependent upon someone else for getting around. They worry about losing the ability to run errands, attend appointments, and participate in activities that they did on their own for decades. They may be concerned about becoming [socially isolated](#) and missing out.

Here are some tips that might help when talking with someone about no longer driving:

- **Be prepared.** Learn about local community services to help someone who can no longer drive before you have the conversation with them. Identify the person’s transportation needs.
- **Avoid confrontation.** Use “I” messages rather than “you” messages. For example, say, “I am concerned about your safety when you are driving,” rather than, “You’re no longer a safe driver.”
- **Stick to the issue.** Discuss the driver’s skills, not their age.
- **Focus on safety and maintaining independence.** Be clear that the goal is for the older driver to continue the [activities they currently enjoy](#) while staying safe. Offer to help the person stay independent. For example, you might say, “I’ll help you figure out how to get where you want to go if driving isn’t possible.”
- **Be positive and supportive.** Recognize the importance of a driver’s license to the older person. Realize they may become defensive, angry, hurt, or withdrawn during your conversation. You might say, “I understand that this may be upsetting,” or “Let’s work together to find a solution.”
- **Consider broaching the topic gradually.** Some experts suggest a gentle introduction of the driving conversation, and then revisiting it gradually over time.

The [NHTSA has a helpful guide](#) to help concerned families and friends better understand older drivers and suggestions on how to begin discussions.

## Is it time to give up driving?

We all age differently, and for this reason, there is not one recommended age to quit driving. So how does one know when to stop? To help decide, ask yourself:

- Do other drivers often honk at me?
- Have I had some accidents even if just “fender benders”?
- Am I having trouble seeing road signs, exits, or lane lines?
- Am I still flexible enough to turn my head to check mirrors and blind spots comfortably?
- Have physical conditions or medications slowed my reaction time?
- Do I get lost frequently, even on familiar roads?
- Do cars or pedestrians seem to appear out of nowhere?
- Am I often distracted while driving?
- Have family, friends, or my doctor said they’re worried about my driving?
- Am I driving less these days because I’m not as sure about my driving as I used to be?
- Do I have trouble staying in my lane?
- Do I have trouble moving my foot between the gas and the brake pedals, or do I sometimes confuse the two?
- Have I been pulled over by a police officer about my driving?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, it may be time to talk with your doctor or family members about your driving, or to consider a driving assessment.

## How will you get around?

Are you worried you won't be able to do the things you want and need to do if you stop driving? Many people have this concern, but there may be more ways to get around than you think. For example, some areas provide free or low-cost bus, subway, rideshare, and taxi services for older people. Some communities offer a carpool service or scheduled trips to the grocery store, mall, or doctor's offices. Religious and civic groups sometimes have volunteers who will drive you where you want to go.

If you have a smartphone or a computer, you could consider using mobile apps available for services like meal, grocery, or prescription deliveries. Most of these are paid services but may have free or lower-cost options for some older adults.

Your local Area Agency on Aging can help you find local services. Call **800-677-1116** or search the [Eldercare Locator](#) online. You also can try searching [Rides In Sight](#) or calling **855-607-4337**, a service of the nonprofit [ITN America](#) that provides information about transportation options for older adults.

You can also think about using a car or ridesharing service. While these may sound pricey, remember that owning a car can be expensive. If you no longer need to make car payments or pay for insurance, maintenance, gas, oil, tolls, and other related expenses, then you may be able to afford other transportation or to buy gas for friends and family members who provide rides.

## You may also be interested in

- Reading more about [driving safety and Alzheimer's disease](#)
- Learning [how to talk to your doctor about sensitive issues](#)
- Finding out more about [vision loss](#) and [hearing loss](#) in older adults

## For more information about driving

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

800-232-4636

888-232-6348 (TTY)

[cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)

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

### Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116

[eldercarelocator@USAgings.org](mailto:eldercarelocator@USAgings.org)

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

### National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

888-327-4236

800-424-9153 (TTY)

[nhtsa.webmaster@dot.gov](mailto:nhtsa.webmaster@dot.gov)

[www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/older-drivers](http://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/older-drivers)

### AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

202-638-5944

[info@aaafoundation.org](mailto:info@aaafoundation.org)

<https://exchange.aaa.com/safety/senior-driver-safety-mobility>

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

## **AARP**

888-687-2277

877-434-7598 (TTY)

[member@aarp.org](mailto:member@aarp.org)

[www.aarp.org/auto/driver-safety](http://www.aarp.org/auto/driver-safety)

## **American Geriatrics Society**

800-247-4779

[info.amger@americangeriatrics.org](mailto:info.amger@americangeriatrics.org)

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

## **Clearinghouse for Older Road User Safety (CHORUS)**

[roadsafeseniors@neweditions.net](mailto:roadsafeseniors@neweditions.net)

[www.roadsafeseniors.org/guides/older-drivers-guide](http://www.roadsafeseniors.org/guides/older-drivers-guide)

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