TIPS For Living Life To Its Fullest

KEEPING OLDER DRIVERS SAFE



BEHAVIORS LIKE PARKING TOO FAR FROM THE CURB, having trouble changing lanes, having minor accidents, getting lost on familiar routes, or improperly leaving or entering expressways may be early signs that an older adult is unsafe to drive. The following tips were shared by occupational therapy practitioners for friends and family members to help older drivers remain safely on the road for as long as possible, and to maintain their independence if driving is no longer an option.

If you want to:

Consider these activity tips:

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

Approach the topic of safe driving.

- Remember that the goal is to preserve the dignity, independence, and safety of the person, not to stop the person from driving.
- Identify specific unsafe driving behaviors, focusing on facts (e.g., "I have noticed that you don't look when backing up") not general concerns (e.g., "I don't like the idea of you still driving"). Never have driving discussions in the car.
- Ask the person to have a physical exam to determine whether changes are related to medication, nutrition, illness, injury, or the aging process.
- Suggest that the person attend a CarFit Event, during which experts will suggest ways to personalize the person's vehicle to be the best fit for visibility, comfort, and safety (see www.Car-Fit.org).

- Frame the discussion so it is helpful rather than threatening, by emphasizing existing skills and considering options at every stage.
- Provide individualized suggestions, such as driving only familiar routes, during daylight, and on side streets.
- Contribute to CarFit events, which are free to the public and focus only on the fit of the person to the vehicle—not on whether the person is safe to drive.
- Assist with developing a "transportation plan." Just as we plan for housing and finances as we age, we need to consider transportation options to ensure continued access to our community as drivers and/or passengers.

Take action if the facts suggest that the person is unsafe to drive.

- Ask the person to undergo a driving evaluation by an occupational therapist.
- Offer alternative forms of transportation until an evaluation can be conducted. Do not let an unsafe driver remain on the road.
- Check local and state regulations. Many states require more frequent checks of vision and driving skills for older drivers. Others require notification and testing when an individual wishes to resume driving after a stroke or other serious illness.
- Provide a "medically at risk driver screening" or a comprehensive driving evaluation, which reviews all aspects of the person's driving. The goal of this evaluation is not to prove whether the driver is safe or unsafe, but to address areas of concern to keep the person driving safely for as long as possible.
- Explore safe solutions, as indicated, that include vehicle adaptations and equipment specific to the person's needs, such as broader mirrors, seat boosters, hand controls, location and navigation technology such as On-Star or GPS, mobility device stowage equipment,

If you want to:

Consider these activity tips:

Offer alternatives if driving is no longer an option.

- Consider friends, family members, or neighbors who could provide rides. This is often most successful if the person can offer something in return (e.g., signing for packages for neighbors who are away during the day, watering plants, providing occasional dinners, etc.).
- Check with grocery stores, places of worship, shopping malls, town halls, etc. to see if they offer transportation services or delivery options.
- Explore volunteer driver programs, paratransit options, taxi services, and public transportation.

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

- Determine whether public transportation is feasible. For example, can the person meet the transportation provider requirements to walk to the bus stop? Step up high enough to get on the bus? Use the subway without getting lost? Set-up and remember pick-up and drop-off appointments? If not, the occupational therapy practitioner will focus on ways to overcome these barriers.
- Provide other options for traveling in the community if public transportation is not possible, based on the person's individual needs and resources.

Need More Information?

You can find additional information, including driver rehabilitation specialists and resources for family members and caregivers, through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org/older-driver. Find a CarFit event near you at www.Car-Fit.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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