

# *Your Older Relative at the Wheel*

## **Overview**

You can help an older relative make the decision to drive more safely or stop driving.

- ~~Is it time to stop driving?~~
- Signs of trouble
- Checking the car
- How you can help
- Talking about the problem
- If it's time to stop driving
- Resources

Older adults are often reluctant to admit that they need to drive more safely or stop driving. You may be worried about an older relative who is having trouble at the wheel but doesn't seem to recognize the problem. Your mother may have had three minor car accidents this year but think they were someone else's fault. Your grandfather may be losing his eyesight and having trouble seeing stop signs but continuing to drive. Are they too old to drive? How can you decide? And what can you do to help?

## **Is it time to stop driving?**

Getting older can make it harder for many people to drive safely. Aging can bring eyesight problems, hearing loss, the need for medication, and decreased mobility, flexibility, and muscle strength. Aging also slows down our reaction time -- how long it takes us to react in an emergency. All of these things can affect a person's driving ability (though some problems, such as the effects of medication, may be temporary). As you look for solutions, it's a good idea to:

- *Keep in mind that some people remain good drivers well into their 90s.* Age alone does not predict whether someone has good or bad driving skills.
- *Try to get an accurate sense of your relative's driving ability.* You might start by asking your relative how comfortable she feels driving. Or ride with your relative (or ask someone you trust to go along as a passenger) to watch for potential problems.
- *Remember that it doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing situation.* Many older drivers can easily manage short, daytime trips around their own neighborhoods, but are unable to handle night, city, or highway driving. You may be able help your relative continue to drive and stay safe.

## **Signs of trouble**

You can get a better sense of the situation by keeping an eye out for potential problems, especially when your relative is driving. Some of the signs to watch for include:

- current traffic violations
- recent fender benders or other accidents
- changing lanes without signaling
- straying into other lanes of traffic

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- failure to respond appropriately to pedestrians
- neglecting to yield the right-of-way to other vehicles
- trouble turning at intersections (especially when making left turns)

Vision problems are often the cause of driving difficulties among older drivers. Signs to watch for include:

- difficulty seeing road signs
- difficulty distinguishing colors on signs, signals, and instrument panels
- sensitivity to light and glare
- reduced night vision
- not being able to see when visibility is poor, such as in bad weather

Encourage your older relative to get an eye checkup if he or she is having trouble seeing while driving.

### **Checking the car**

It may be helpful to check the car before you decide that an older relative has a driving problem. Ask yourself or your relative:

- Are the steering wheel, mirrors, and seats adjusted to fit your relative's size and height?
- Can your relative easily see over the dashboard and reach the pedals?
- Are the windows and mirrors clean and free of hanging objects?
- Does the car have windshield wipers that don't streak or smear?
- Are the windows and windshields free of tints that can reduce vision?

Depending on the severity of your relative's problem, you may also want to look into vision aids such as wide-angle mirrors, which are available from auto supply stores and catalogs. You might also encourage a relative who is buying a new car to choose one with an easy-to-spot color instead of black or brown.

### **How you can help**

If you've made sure the car is safe, you might encourage your relative to:

- avoid driving at night, in bad weather, or during peak traffic periods
- cut back on long distance driving
- select driving routes in advance

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- always wear a seat belt
- get regular checkups, including for vision and hearing
- check with a doctor or pharmacist to make sure medications do not affect driving ability
- suggest exercises to increase flexibility, mobility, and alertness
- use polarized sunglasses to minimize glare
- keep low beams on during the daytime to boost visibility for other drivers

You may also want to suggest that your relative take a driver refresher course. Most states offer courses on safe or defensive driving for older drivers. Be sure to find out whether a course provides driving practice or classroom instruction only. Some states offer discounts on car insurance for older drivers who successfully complete refresher courses.

#### Talking about the problem

Talking about driving problems can be difficult. Driving is often tied to feelings of competence and independence, so even thinking about giving it up might be hard for an older adult. Your relative's first reaction to a discussion about driving changes may include anger or defensiveness. You can make the conversation easier if you:

- *Ease into the subject.* You might say something like, "I've been reading that a person's driving ability changes with age. What do you think?"
- *Find out about other transportation options ahead of time.* The possibilities may include taxis, carpooling, public transportation, local shuttle buses or vans for older people, or volunteer driver networks that offer door-to-door service for older adults. Somebody who doesn't want to have to rely on friends or family to get around might be more open to giving up driving after learning about the range of options available.
- *Make sure to involve your relative in any decision-making.* When you sit down to talk, suggest a few options, then let your relative decide. Be careful not to present your ideas as a final arrangement. You might say, "I'm concerned about your safety. I don't want to keep you from driving. I only want to make some suggestions that can help you continue driving as long as possible."
- *Be specific about why you're concerned.* Link your comments to particular incidents or physical changes. Instead of saying, "You're not a safe driver," try, "When we went out last week, you drove through a stop sign. Are you having trouble seeing some of the road signs?"

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- *Try to be understanding if your relative resists a change.* Getting a discussion started will at least help you start working toward some gradual changes.

#### **If it's time to stop driving**

If your older relative's driving is endangering his or her safety, or the safety of other people, it is time to stop driving. The decision may be less difficult to make if you:

- *Ask a doctor or trusted outsider to break the news.* A family friend or physician may be more persuasive and can sometimes help to reduce family conflict.
- *Report the problem.* If you can't convince your relative to stop driving, or if your relative can't make that decision because of a condition such as dementia, contact your local Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) or Driver's Licensing Agency. Most states have a mechanism in place for reporting unsafe drivers and will try to protect confidentiality. The DMV will contact your relative and request that a driving test be taken.
- *Remember that many states issue restricted licenses.* These allow people to drive only during certain times of the day or within a certain distance from home. States often issue restricted licenses to people who have been asked to take a retest. If you report a problem to your Department of Motor Vehicles early enough, your relative may be able to step down gradually from driving under a restricted license to not driving at all. This can help your relative adjust over time to a change that ultimately will make life safer for your relative and for other drivers.

#### **Resources**

##### **AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety**

1440 New York Avenue, NW

Suite 201

Washington, DC 20005

800-993-7222

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

The AAA Foundation offers free educational brochures including *How to Help an Older Driver*, *The Older and Wiser Driver*, and *Drivers 55 Plus: Check Your Own Performance*—a self-rating form of questions, facts, and suggestions for safe driving, which helps older drivers evaluate their own driving skills. To order, visit the AAA Foundation Web site and click on “free items,” or call their toll-free number.

##### **American Automobile Association (AAA)**

1000 AAA Drive

Heathrow, FL 32746

407-444-7000

[www.aaa.com](http://www.aaa.com)

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The AAA conducts a course called "Safe Driving for Mature Operators." This course is open to drivers who are 55 or older. Classroom instruction is offered. Some sites have the ability to test night vision, reaction time, etc. Call your local AAA branch to find out about classes in your area.

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

601 E Street NW  
Washington, DC 20049  
800-424-3410

[www.aarp.com](http://www.aarp.com)

AARP offers a course called "55 Alive/Mature Drivers" to those who are 55 and older or AARP members. Courses are taught by volunteers. The cost of the class is usually around \$8. Call the AARP for information about resources in your relative's area.

**National Safety Council**

1121 Spring Lake Drive  
Itasca, IL 60143  
800-621-7619

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

The National Safety Council offers people 55 and over a course called "Coaching the Mature Driver." The cost of the course may vary from state to state. Classroom instruction is offered. Call the National Safety Council's toll-free number for information on local classes.