

When is it time to stop driving?

Everyone ages differently, so some people are perfectly capable of continuing to drive in their seventies, eighties, and even beyond. Many elders, however, are at higher risk for road accidents. The elderly are more likely to receive traffic citations for failing to yield, turning improperly, and running red lights and stop signs - an indication of decreased driving ability. A person 65 or older who is involved in a car accident is more likely to be seriously hurt, more likely to require hospitalization, and more likely to die than younger people involved in the same crash. In particular, fatal crash rates rise sharply after a driver has reached the age of 70.

If you know an older driver who is experiencing trouble on the road, it is important to carefully monitor the situation. This article can help you determine whether you should take steps to encourage the senior to stop driving.

What risk factors of aging can affect safe driving?

Because everyone ages differently, some drivers are safe behind the wheel well into their eighth or ninth decade, while others need to find other sources of transportation much earlier. Some key risk factors for senior drivers follow.

Risk Factors of Aging That Can Affect Driving Ability

Visual decline	Vision declines with age, which means depth perception and judging the speed of oncoming traffic become more difficult. The eyes also lose the ability to process light, which makes night vision worse and causes more sensitivity to bright sunlight and glare. By age 60, you need three times the amount of light that you did at age 20 in order to drive safely after nightfall (AgeNet.com).
Hearing loss	Approximately one-third of adults over age 65 are hearing-impaired. Because hearing loss happens gradually, a senior may not realize they are missing important cues when driving, such as honking, emergency sirens, or a child's bicycle bell.
Limited mobility and increased reaction time	With age, flexibility may decrease as response time increases. A full range of motion is crucial on the road. In addition, chronic conditions can limit mobility (rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson's disease, sleep apnea, heart disease, or diabetes).
Medications	People often take more medications as they age. Certain medications, as well as a combination of medications and alcohol, can increase driving risk. Be particularly careful about medication side-effects and interactions between medications.
Drowsiness	Aging can make sleeping more difficult, resulting in daytime tiredness and an increased tendency to doze off during the day (or while driving). In addition, certain prescription drugs cause drowsiness.
Dementia or brain impairment	Mental impairment or dementia makes driving more dangerous and more frustrating. Brain impairment may cause delayed reactions to sudden or confusing situations on the road.

In addition, numerous environmental factors that affect people of all ages can magnify a senior's diminished ability to drive safely:

- signs and road markings that are difficult to see or to read
- complex and confusing intersections
- older vehicles that lack automatic safety features
- newer dashboard instrument panels with multiple displays

What are some warning signs of unsafe driving?

If a senior who is close to you is finding driving more difficult than before, watch for signs of unsafe driving. If you notice any of the warning signs, it is time to reassess the senior's road risk. **Many small warning signs of unsafe driving can add up to the important decision to quit driving.**

Warning Signs of Unsafe Driving

- Abrupt lane changes, braking, or acceleration
- More frequent "close calls" (i.e., almost crashing), or dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs, etc
- Failing to use the turn signal, or keeping the signal on without changing lanes
- Drifting into other lanes
- Driving on the wrong side of the road or in the shoulder
- Trouble reading signs or navigating directions to get somewhere
- Missing highway exits or backing up after missing an exit
- Range-of-motion issues (in looking over the shoulder, moving the hands or feet, etc.)
- Trouble moving the foot from the gas to the brake pedal, or confusing the two pedals
- Feeling more nervous or fearful while driving or feeling exhausted after driving
- More conflict on the road: other drivers honking; frustration or anger at other drivers
- Oblivious to the frustration of other drivers, not understanding why they are honking
- Reluctance from friends or relatives to be in the car with the senior driving
- Getting lost more often
- Trouble paying attention to signals, road signs, pavement markings, or pedestrians
- Slow reaction to changes in the driving environment
- Increased traffic tickets or "warnings" by traffic or law enforcement officers

What steps can I take if I am concerned about the safety of a senior driver?

If you are concerned about an elderly driver, closely monitor their driving before deciding whether they need to brush up on their driving skills or give up their driver's license altogether. Some steps include:

- **Watch for changes** in driving habits, general behavior, and health.
- Encourage a **driving evaluation** through your local Department of Motor Vehicles, along with **refresher driving lessons** and the [AARP Driver Safety course](#).
- Offer the senior some **self-evaluation tools** to assess driving risk, or work together on these quizzes. See especially the driver assessment questionnaires from the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) and the [University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute](#).

- Explore ways to **reduce driving**, such as making purchases online or through mail-order catalogs. If possible, arrange for home delivery of groceries, and home visits by clergy, medical and personal care providers, and government service providers.
- If necessary, **garner support** from the older adult's primary care physician and other family members.
- Research and propose **alternative modes of transportation**. Maybe the senior can continue to drive some of the time (such as in the daytime or off the freeway), and alternative transportation can fill the need for rides at other times. See [Senior Driving: Transportation Alternatives and Tips for Safe Driving](#) for more information on transportation alternatives..

How can I talk with a senior driver who should stop driving?

If you feel that it is time to talk to a senior close to you about stopping driving, approach the issue with sensitivity. A driver's license signifies more than the ability to drive a car; it is a symbol of:

- freedom
- independence and independent living
- self-sufficiency
- being employed
- fun and spontaneity
- involvement in social and religious activities

Understandably, driving is not a privilege that anyone—teenager or elder—wants to relinquish willingly. As important as it is to treat the senior driver with respect and not jump to unjust conclusions, it is also important to help the elderly driver retire from the road.

Start slowly and try to persuade the senior to give up the keys. Some approaches that may work:

- **Be understanding about resistance. The senior may dismiss you and refuse to listen to you. Emotion may get in the way of a rational decision.**
- **Ask questions, rather than make demands. For example,** “Would you consider not driving at night?” See [Making the "Key" Decision](#).
- **Talk about safety considerations.** Many senior drivers who shouldn't be driving have already had an accident or some close calls. Remind the impaired driver of the danger of serious injuries and that the safety of others is also at risk.
- **Explain transportation options.** Help the senior driver see that living without a car won't make them permanently homebound. Acknowledge the lifestyle change, but also show them how to continue favorite activities and to remain mobile.
- **Emphasize monetary savings.** The cost savings associated with giving up a car may be a selling point for some older drivers. Costs include insurance, gasoline, maintenance and repairs, and license and registration fees.
- **Offer rides and visits.** Volunteer to come by once a week or to provide rides on a regular basis for things like grocery shopping, library visits, or doctors' appointments.

- **Seek confirmation of the situation.** Some elderly drivers may be aware of their faltering ability, but be reluctant to give up driving completely. Another person's concerns may force the senior driver to act. They may even feel relieved to have someone else help make the decision to stop driving.

For more ideas on how to talk to a senior about stopping driving, see [We need to talk...Family conversations with older drivers](#) and other [resources](#) below.

What if the senior driver refuses to give up the keys?

If the senior driver refuses to give up the keys, you may need to take stronger steps. Ideas for further action include:

- Take away the car keys.
- Disable the car or remove it from the senior driver's residence.
- Ask the elderly driver's doctor to write a prescription stating "no driving."
- Enlist the help of a local police officer to explain the importance of safe driving and the legal implications of unsafe driving.

Some seniors may forget that they aren't supposed to drive. If that is the case, it is even more important to remove the car or the keys to make it impossible to drive.

[If High Risk Drivers Refuse to Stop](#) provides information about dealing with a senior who won't give up the keys.

How can I help a senior adjust to life without driving?

Like any change, adjusting to life without a car will be tough at first. Some tips on helping a senior to make the transition include:

- **If possible, work with the senior to decide when to limit or stop driving. This sense of control is very important.** See [People With Vision Loss Share Insights on Driving](#), from VisionConnection.org.
- **Help the senior find other ways to get around: research availability of transportation in their area, and schedules, routes, and costs.**
- **Encourage the senior to reach out and connect to new people, many of whom may offer rides.**
- Make sure that the senior has **rides to their usual activities**. When a senior stops driving, continuing with other routines can be very soothing.
- **Help the senior to make a schedule.** They can plan activities on a weekly basis and match up the best ride for the activity. Some activities, like doctor's appointments, require punctuality, and others, like going to the grocery store, may be more flexible.
- **Investigate home delivery.** Find out which services deliver and help the senior to learn to use the Internet for shopping.
- **Remind the senior to plan for fun.** They must think beyond "needs" when planning their transportation schedule. Outings for church and social events are just as important.

- **Help develop or revive hobbies** to do while riding, such as reading, knitting, or crossword puzzles. They may find that they enjoy the ride more when they don't have to drive.
- **Encourage the senior to use positive language** to describe their situation and to ask for assistance. Thinking about their transition as one that they *can* handle will help them to adjust quickly.
- **Offer rides** and find others who can offer rides. Asking for rides is one of the hardest parts of not driving. For many non-driving seniors, asking for rides highlights the unwelcome truth of dependence.
- Some seniors may adjust better if they can **keep their own car**, but have others drive them. Their own car may feel more comfortable and familiar, and the sense of loss from not driving may be lessened.

For a comprehensive article about seniors' coping with not driving, see [Coping](#), from the New York State Office for the Aging.

Taken from Helpguide.org