

# SENIOR DRIVING Knowing When to Stop

by **NANCY WEBRE** of Evergreen In-Home Care Services

Every time an incident occurs on the roads that involves a senior, the question arises as to whether or not people of a certain age should have to pass their driving test again or have special restrictions for operating a vehicle. The financial liability and safety of older drivers can be a serious concern.



As we age, it is normal for our driving abilities to change. Some drivers are as safe at 80 years of age as they were at 40. However, everyone ages differently, so there is no definitive cutoff when someone should stop driving. If a senior is beginning to experience signs of dementia or memory loss, driving may be one of the first places you may notice their mental deterioration. They may have a difficult time processing information to make quick decisions. Or, they experience a memory lapse and even get lost. Slowed motor reflexes, decreased vision or impaired hearing may also become an issue. Aging tends to result in a reduction of coordination, strength and flexibility and can have a major impact on our ability to drive, for example:

- Reaction time may slow with age. We may be slower to realize that the vehicle in front of us has slowed or stopped.
  - Hearing loss could affect ones ability to hear sirens which could lead to a collision with an emergency vehicle.
  - Diminished arm strength can make it difficult to quickly and effectively turn the steering wheel.
  - Leg pain could make it hard to move your foot from the gas peddle to the brake.
- How do we know when it is no longer safe for a senior to be driving? Red flags may include:
- Close calls, such as scrapes on the car or garage doors.

- Increased citations such as tickets or warnings by law enforcement.
- Difficulty with the basics of driving, such as: failing to use turn signals or keeping the signal on without changing lanes, sudden acceleration or sudden lane changes.

It is important to plan ahead and take steps to ensure the safety of your loved ones on the road. Driver

safety can be a sensitive issue for seniors, loss of ones driver's license signifies a huge loss of independence. If you are in a position of talking to a senior about their driving, it is important to remember to be respectful and understanding of the loss of their independence. Give them specific examples of your observations of their driving. Ask other family members, friends or a physician to get involved with the discussion about driving concerns. Find alternatives, such as public transportation or senior transit, ride sharing, taxis or private drivers to help with the transition. The more alternatives one has, the easier the adjustment will be. Giving up the car keys or reducing driving does not mean the end of total independence.

If rational discussion to convince a driver to give up their car keys is unsuccessful, you can make an anonymous report to the Department of Motor Vehicles or further discuss your concerns with your loved one's physician.

Getting older does not necessarily mean that a person's driving days are over. However, seniors behind the wheel and family their members should pay attention to warning signs that age may be interfering with driving safety. A senior's safety and the safety of others must come first.

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## Senior Driving: Knowing When to Stop

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