



**SENIOR  
CROSSROADS ...**

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## Letting go of the car keys: Part 1

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Have you ever walked out to the parking lot after shopping and forgotten where you parked the car? After spending half an hour looking for your car, it dawns on you that you walked out the wrong door and the car is parked on the other side of the mall. Or — after locating your car in the lot — you get in and try to start it only to realize that it isn't your car? This has happened to most of us at one time or another — including yours truly. You get a little giggle out of it and move on.

But for some, this is a way of life and not so funny. Panic, frustration and terror replace a little embarrassment. Sooner or later the time comes for all of us to hang up the car keys. Unfortunately the time to do that isn't always noticed by the person doing the driving. So what do we look for when it's time for us to leave the driving to someone else? How can we help our loved ones who can't seem to let go of the car keys?

More and more older drivers are on the roads these days. It's important to know that getting older doesn't automatically turn people into bad drivers. Many of us continue to be good, safe drivers as we age. But after age 75, the risk of being in a collision increases for every mile a person drives, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Older drivers — and their loved ones — need to pay attention to driving skills and make the appropriate adjustments, whether that means adapting their driving habits or hanging up their car keys for good.

But there are physical, mental and emotional changes that can affect driving skills as we age. Examining your own driving proficiency can help to keep you safer on the road or help you make the decision to hang up the car keys. There are many factors that come into play during this self-assessment.

### How Does Age Affect Driving?

**Physical changes:** As we age, joints tend to get stiffer and muscles weaken, making it more difficult to do driving tasks such as turning your head to look back, quickly turning the steering wheel, or safely hitting the brakes — particularly in an emergency. Maybe you have experienced vision and/or hearing changes.

As we age, we need more light to see things, which is why we gradually shy away from driving at night. Glare from the sun, oncoming headlights or other street lights may trouble you more now than before. Our peripheral vision area also gets narrower. Eye diseases such as cataracts, macular degeneration or glaucoma also have an impact on driving ability. You may not notice honking vehicles or railroad crossing bells or whistles or hear oncoming emergency vehicles until they are almost upon you. Or maybe you've noticed that your reflexes aren't as quick as they once were.

**Cognition changes:** Driving requires that we integrate several skills at the same time, such as memory, visual processing and attention. Both our speed of processing and judgment can become impaired, jeopardizing driving skills. But at some point in time during the aging process, memory and cognition decline and tend to dull those skills, making attentive driving more difficult. The effects and progress of dementia can be subtle, but they also can have a corrosive effect on decision-making and good judgment. People with dementia may believe that they can drive safely and may often insist on doing so, no matter how badly impaired they are.

Some people with mild dementia can continue to drive, but if the dementia is moderate to severe, the individual should stop driving altogether. Drivers afflicted with Alzheimer's disease may forget familiar routes or even how to drive safely. They become more likely to make driving mistakes and they have more "close calls" than other drivers. However, people in the early stages of Alzheimer's may be able to keep driving for a while. Your doctor can help determine if your memory and cognition issues are minimal enough for you to be safe while driving or if it's time to put the keys away.

**Health Changes:** While health problems can affect driving at any age, some occur more often as we get older. Arthritis, Parkinson's disease, thyroid disease, high or low blood pressure, nervous system disorders and diabetes can have a negative effect on safe driving. People who suffer from depression or anxiety may become distracted while driving. The residual effects of a stroke or heart condition, surgery after effects or even a lack of sleep also can

cause driving issues. Devices such as an automatic defibrillator or pacemaker might cause an irregular heartbeat or dizziness which can make driving dangerous.

**Medicine Side Effects:** You know those warning labels you see on medicine bottles about the dangers of driving or operating machinery while taking the medication? Don't ignore the warnings. Some medicines can make it harder for you to drive safely. Medicines such as sleep aids, anti-depression drugs, antihistamines for allergies and colds, pain killers and diabetes medications can impact driving.

### **Am I a safe driver?**

You probably already know of some driving situations that have become difficult for you: maybe driving at night, the higher speeds on highways, traffic situations during rush hour or bad weather. If these are areas of concern to you, try to change your schedule or driving habits to avoid them. Did you know that older drivers are most at risk when yielding the right of way, turning (especially making left turns), changing lanes, passing and using expressway ramps? Be sure to pay special attention at those times.

Since we all age differently, there is no way to say what age should be the upper limit for driving. So, how do you know if you should stop driving? To help you decide, ask yourself these questions (and be honest with your answers — your life or the life of another could depend on it):

Do other drivers often honk at me? Have I had some accidents, even "fender benders" or unexplained scratches or dents? Have I had more traffic tickets or warnings in the past several years? Do I have more trouble paying attention to or missing signals, road signs and pavement markings? Do I find it more difficult to stay in the lane of travel or to change lanes?

Do I get lost, even on roads I know? Do cars or people walking seem to appear out of nowhere? Have family, friends or my doctor said they are worried about my driving? Am I driving less these days because I am not as sure about my driving as I used to be?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you should think seriously about whether or not you still are a safe driver. If you honestly answered no to all these questions, don't forget to have your eyes, ears and physical well-being checked regularly.

### **Smart driving tips**

- Plan to drive on streets you know and limit your trips to places that are easy to get to and close to home.
- Take routes that let you avoid risky spots like ramps and left turns.
- Add extra time for travel if driving conditions are bad.
- Don't drive when you are stressed or tired.
- Don't drive with the radio on or converse with your passengers or use cell phones.
- Always wear seatbelts; drive with your headlights on and keep them clean and aligned.
- Make sure there is enough space between both the cars in front of you and the car behind you. If you are driving at higher speeds or if the weather is bad, leave even more space between you and the next car.
- Use your rear window defroster to keep the back window clear at all times.
- Keep your car in the best shape, with tune-ups, good windshield wipers and aligned headlights.
- Drive a car with features that make driving easier, such as power steering, power brakes, automatic transmission and large mirrors. Drive a car with air bags.
- Check your windshield wiper blades often and replace them when needed.

Taking a driving refresher class every few years is recommended for everyone over 60 years of age or younger if there have been medical or memory changes. Many car insurance companies give you a discount on your rates when you pass this type of class. Check with AARP, AAA or local private driving schools to find a class near you.

If you make the decision to give up driving, you don't have to give up the activities you enjoy. You still can stay active and do the things you like to do. Most communities have more options for getting around than you might think. Some areas offer low-cost bus service for older people. Religious and civic groups sometimes have volunteers who take seniors where they want to go.

Your local Senior Information and Assistance office has information about transportation services in your area.

### **NEXT MONTH: Letting Go Of The Car Keys: Part 2**

For more information and resource assistance, please e-mail Pam Scott at [info@discovery-mc.com](mailto:info@discovery-mc.com) or call 683-7047. Scott has many years of experience working with seniors and their families in skilled nursing, assisted living, transportation and benefits. Scott is the community relations director for Discovery Memory Care in Sequim.