

DRIVING DECISIONS

Helping aging parents assess their ability behind the wheel

by Cynthia Burkhart and Clifton E. Barber

In 2002, The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration reported that older drivers accounted for 5 percent of all people injured in traffic accidents. They also found that these drivers accounted for over 12 percent of all traffic fatalities and 17 percent of all pedestrian deaths. A recent study conducted by AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, found that drivers 65 and older are twice as likely to die in a crash as drivers between 55 and 64.

Driving decisions

Few people plan for the possibility of life without a car according to the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center (1998). This study found that while older drivers find it difficult to come to such a decision, many children try to let their parents come to their own decision. Sue Sampson and Loren Staplin, (Myths and Facts About Older Drivers, Generations, Summer, 2003), found that most older drivers are safe drivers and tend to restrict their driving as they become aware of their limitations. In fact, most will give up driving because they lack the confidence to drive. However, in cases where the older driver is unaware of the limitations caused by aging or medical conditions, the decision is never made until something happens!

Understand their view

Children need to be aware of the magnitude of asking an older parent to stop driving. Jean Shope (*What Does giving Up Driving Mean to Older Drivers, and Why Is It So Difficult*, Generations, Summer, 2003), found that when older drivers stop driving, they feel that they lose their identity and freedom and are, therefore, less valued. Because of the emotions tied to driving it is important to first encourage the older driver to self-assess and allow them the chance to make their own decision. *Aging Solutions* notes that

aging can diminish the ability to drive safely because of a slowdown in response time, a loss of clarity in vision and hearing, a loss of muscle strength and flexibility, drowsiness due to medication, and a reduction in the ability to focus or concentrate.

Alternate transportation

If you are concerned that your parent is at risk, talk with them about your concerns and help them come to a decision. Gradually taking away their freedom to drive is better, but you may not have the luxury of time. Regardless, of how the older driver stops driving, it is important to help them adapt to life without a car. Discuss alternative transportation with them and help them access that transportation. It is also important to remember that when an older driver stops driving, they are making a lifestyle change.

Risk factors:

If your parent has difficulty self-assessing, help them by being their passenger. Aging Solutions, suggests looking for the following risk factors:

- ◇ Driving at inappropriate speed too fast or too slow
- ◇ Asking passengers to help check if it is clear to pass or turn
- ◇ Responding slowly to or not noticing pedestrians, bicyclists or other drivers
- ◇ Ignoring, disobeying or misinterpreting street signs and traffic lights
- ◇ Failing to yield to other cars or pedestrians who have the right-of-way
- ◇ Failing to judge distances between cars correctly
- ◇ Appearing drowsy, confused or frightened
- ◇ Having one or more near accidents
- ◇ Drifting across lane markings or bumping into curbs
- ◇ Forgetting to turn on headlights after dusk
- ◇ Having difficulty with glare from oncoming headlights, streetlights, or other shiny objects
- ◇ Having difficulty turning his head, neck, shoulders or body while

driving or parking

- ◇ Having too little strength to turn the wheel quickly in an emergency such as a tire failure, a child darting into traffic, etc.,
- ◇ Getting lost repeatedly.

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