



Driving and Beyond



Why does driving matter as we age?

Transportation is a daily necessity in our lives, and many of us rely on driving our own automobile to get where we need to go. According to the Federal Highway Administration, in 2019 there were approximately 30 million licensed drivers aged 70 and older—fewer than younger age groups and this group drives fewer miles.¹ However, today, older people keep their licenses longer and make up a larger proportion of the driving population than in the past. The percentage of the age 70+ population with licenses increased from 73% 1997 to 83% in 2019.² Given that the number of people over the age of 70 is growing, driving safely into the longer life course is of utmost importance.

What affects our ability to drive as we age?

Driving is an important part of daily life for most adults, but the risk of being injured or killed in a traffic accident increases with age.³

As we grow older, changes in our health can affect our driving skills; specific physical, cognitive, and visual abilities may wane with advancing age for some people. These functional impairments can interfere with driving and may increase risks for accidents, especially in challenging driving situations, such as turning left and merging or changing lanes.⁴ A study of serious U.S. crashes found that the most frequent error made by drivers 70 and older was inadequate surveillance, which included looking for but not seeing another vehicle, and failing to look.⁵

According to the National Institute on Aging, the following issues can impact our ability to drive safely as we age:

Visual impairments: Decreased night vision, trouble reading street signs, and light sensitivity can impair ability to drive safely. Eye diseases, such as glaucoma, cataracts, and macular degeneration can cause vision problems.

Mobility limitations: changes in joints and muscles make it harder to turn our heads to backup and check blind spots, turn the steering wheel quickly, or brake safely.

Hearing impairments: Decreased awareness of horns, sirens, and noises from one's own vehicle may affect pulling over or getting out of the way safely.

Cognitive impairments: Poor memory and decision-making skills can affect someone's ability to safely use an automobile.

Prescription medication: Certain medications can cause drowsiness, lightheadedness, inattention, and slowed reflexes.

Slower reaction time: With age, reflexes might slow, leading to longer reaction times that can cause safety issues when driving.⁶

How can you stay safe while driving longer?

We ensure we are driving safely by self-evaluating changes in our driving ability and monitoring any changes. One out of every four adults between the ages of 65 and 74 have adapted by driving only during daytime hours, reducing overall travel, staying closer to home, or seeking alternative transportation options.² Driving ability might be influenced by several factors, so consulting with doctors and care partners when you notice changes is crucial. Some concerns can be easily alleviated with adaptations like eyeglasses and medication dosage or timing adjustments.

Are you concerned about the driving ability of someone you know?

Having “the talk” about continuing to drive can be difficult. If you are concerned about the driving ability of someone you know, you can read the National Institute of Aging’s website to learn more about starting the conversation about adjusting driving habits or finding alternatives.

Here are some alternatives to driving:

Taxi services: Flexible, and skipping the trouble of vehicle maintenance, taxis can be a good alternative to driving.

Mobile application driving services: Similar to taxis, Lyft and Uber are examples of mobile phone applications that can connect you with a driver for a one-time fee.

Volunteer drivers: Local churches, government or community organizations might have volunteer driver services at no cost for older adults.

Community shuttles: Some municipalities offer shuttle services to commonly visited locations like grocery stores and doctor’s offices. Check with your city manager’s office or parks and recreation department for information.

Medical transport services: You may be eligible for free or reduced cost transportation services to medical appointments if you have a diagnosed disability or are receiving certain medical benefits. Check with your healthcare or insurance provider for information on this option.

You can learn more about transportation resources for older adults in your community by using Eldercare Locator’s website.

Research Spotlight: WashU Research on Driving, Disease, and Aging.

The following are important findings from studies published by and in collaboration with WashU researchers.

Older adults anticipate they will have to stop driving before end-of-life.⁷ While older adults are driving more than ever, many older adults expect to be unable to drive before the end of life. This emphasizes the importance of planning ahead for transportation.

Caregivers are able to accurately evaluate ability to drive safely. Research found that caregivers of older adults are able to make accurate their care partner’s ability to drive safely. This research implies the importance of caregivers being involved in planning ahead for safe driving in later life.

Cognitive decline results in unsafe driving patterns. Using a chip that detects driving patterns in an older adult’s vehicle, researchers found that cognitive decline in older adults results in unsafe driving patterns. This emphasizes the importance of self-monitoring driving after cognitive decline is assessed.

Driving patterns might be a way to catch early dementia and Alzheimer’s. Using the same in-vehicle chip to monitor driving in older adults with cognitive decline, researchers are now studying if they can anticipate cognitive decline by monitoring driving patterns. If this research is viable, it can provide a new way to self-monitor for cognitive decline.



Resources

Concerned about an older driver? The National Institute on Aging has information about how to have a conversation about unsafe driving.

Website: <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/older-drivers#concerns>

Want a refresher course in driving? AARP has a Smart Driver course that you can register for.

Website: <https://www.aarpdriversafety.org/>

Want to find alternatives to driving? Eldercare Locator's website can be used to find transportation in your community.

Website: <https://eldercare.acl.gov/public/Resources/LearnMoreAbout/Transportation.aspx>

Want help driving with functional limitations? The American Occupational Therapy Association provides information on occupational therapists specializing in driving rehabilitation, and how to find them in your area.

OT information: <https://www.aota.org/practice/productive-aging/driving/clients/evaluate/eval-by-ot.aspx>

OT Locator: <https://www.aota.org/Practice/Productive-Aging/Driving/driving-specialists-directory-search.aspx>

Area Agencies on Aging are also good places to look for transportation resources. You can find an Area Agency on Aging near you by using their database.

Website: <https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/About/AgingNetwork/AAA.aspx>

United Way's hotline is a good resource for finding transportation in your area.

Phone: 211

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