

How to Know When Someone Should Stop Driving

Giving up the car keys is bound to be hard for your aging family member -- and for you

Quick summary

If your aging parent or other family member is like most people, the decision to stop driving is likely to be a wrenching one. It raises daunting practical problems (How am I going to get to the doctor? What about my weekly outings for dinner and a movie?). It also represents another loss at a time of life already buffeted by major losses -- of independence, health, and lifelong friends and loved ones.

For practical and emotional reasons, then, giving up driving is a transition that everyone involved wishes to put off as long as possible. It's no wonder that many adult children and spouses say that taking away the car keys was among the hardest things they ever had to do.

Older drivers: increased risk

Still, if you have concerns about a family member's driving ability, it's vital not to ignore them. Many seniors are able to drive safely well into their 80s and even early 90s, but it's also common for elderly people to have vision and hearing problems, slowed reaction times, and illnesses that can jeopardize their ability to drive safely.

According to a report by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, the rate of accidents per mile of driving increases steadily for drivers 65 and older. More worrisome still, drivers 80 and older have higher crash death rates than any other group except teenage drivers, according to the Centers for Disease Control. (One reason: Older drivers are physically more frail than other drivers and thus more likely to die in a crash.)

How can you tell when the time has come for someone to stop driving? Caring.com has developed guidelines that will help you avoid being an alarmist, while also realizing when the time has arrived that driving is no longer a safe activity for the person in your care.



Caring.com Recommends a To-Do List

[What to Do if You Suspect a Loved One Is in Declining Health](#)

If you have concerns about your parents' health, this practical 10-step list will guide you through getting answers to your important questions.

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Risk factors for older drivers

The following factors should not rule out driving, but they can elevate risk and warrant monitoring:

- **Health conditions.** Physical and mental impairments that accompany aging, from Parkinson's disease to dementia, can compromise driving agility and judgment. If you have questions about someone's ability to drive given his health problems, consult with his physicians, if possible, and raise the issue of driving safety. (Keep in mind that his physician can't talk to you without his permission, unless you have power of attorney.)
- **Vision impairment.** Vision is obviously a key component of driving ability. In fact, according to Elizabeth Dugan, author of *The Driving Dilemma*, "90 percent of the information needed to drive safely relates to the ability to see clearly." From accurately reading the speedometer to detecting pedestrians on the side of the road, good driving requires good eyesight. But deterioration in vision is an inevitable effect of aging; in people 75 and older, vision impairment rates increase significantly, according to the Centers for Disease Control. As the eye ages, far less light reaches the retina, for one thing. Older eyes are also more susceptible to cataracts, glaucoma, and other problems that impair vision. Encourage your family member to have regular eye exams, and check in with his eye doctor if you have concerns.
- **Hearing impairment.** Few people age without some deterioration in their hearing. In fact, one-third of those over 65 have hearing problems. Hearing loss can happen gradually, without realizing it, and undermine his ability to hear horns, screeching tires, sirens, and other sounds that would normally put someone on high alert. Make sure the person in your care has regular hearing tests.
- **Prescription drug use and drug interactions.** Many drugs can compromise driving ability by causing drowsiness, blurred vision,

confusion, tremors, or other side effects. Certain drugs taken in combination can also interact and cause serious problems. If your family member takes a lot of pills each day, as many elderly people do, educate yourself about the drugs and possible side effects. Even herbal remedies and over-the-counter medications can affect driving ability. Talk to your family member's physicians and pharmacist, and be sure to ask about possible drug interactions.

- ***Alcohol abuse.*** Drinking and driving is always a dangerous combination; add old age to the mix and you have a disaster waiting to happen. As people age, alcohol remains in the system longer and tolerance declines. Also, elderly folks are likely to be on medication, which can exacerbate the effects of alcohol. Given these risks, and the difficulty of gauging exactly how much alcohol will impair an individual's driving, Elizabeth Dugan's advice is simple: "If you drink, don't drive. Period." If you suspect that your family member is drinking and driving, don't wait to take action.

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Warning signs that indicate it might be time for your family member to stop driving

Watch for these signs of a dangerous driver:

- Find out if his auto insurance rates have increased recently or if he's received traffic tickets or warnings.
- Check to see if his car has new dents or nicks.
- Pay attention if he's reluctant to drive at night, seems tense or exhausted after driving, or complains of getting lost.
- Discreetly check in with his friends and neighbors and ask if they've noticed any driving problems.

When you accompany your family member on an errand or an outing, encourage him to take the wheel and look for these signs of driving problems:

- Does he fasten his seat belt?
- Does he sit comfortably at the wheel, or does he crane forward or show signs of discomfort?
- Does he seem tense and preoccupied, or easily distracted?
- Is he aware of traffic lights, road signs, pedestrians, and the reactions of other motorists?

- Does he often tailgate or drift toward the oncoming lane or into other lanes?
- Does he react slowly or with confusion in unexpected situations?

If you drive with him a few times and notice problems, it's time to [initiate a discussion](#) about your concerns and whether it might be time for to stop driving. This is when you bring in a third party your GCM and or Doctor (See also [Checklist: 8 Ways to Assess Someone's Driving](#)).

Links

☒ What to Do if You Suspect a Loved One Is in Declining Health: http://www.caring.com/to_do_lists/what-to-do-if-you-suspect-a-loved-one-is-in-declining-health

☒ initiate a discussion: <http://www.caring.com/articles/how-to-approach-your-parents-with-concerns-about-their-driving-ability-2>

☒ Checklist: 8 Ways to Assess Someone's Driving: <http://www.caring.com/checklists/assess-parents-driving>