



## THE DRIVING DILEMMA: When Should Seniors Stop Driving

### THE PROBLEM EXISTS

- In June of 1999, a 71 year old woman struck and killed a baby in a stroller while driving home on an expired driver's license after failing her driving test.
- In July of 1999, an 87 year old woman injured 28 people after she drove her car into a restaurant while trying to move out of a parking space.
- A 72 year old man from southern Minnesota continued driving to the VA Hospital in Minneapolis for treatment of his Alzheimer's Disease despite failing a driving test at the VA.
- A confused 88 year old man was found by the police in Owatonna, with his odometer showing that he drove over 250 miles from his home in Bloomington that day.

A University of Alabama study in 1997 found that drivers 65 and over had more traffic convictions, crashes and fatalities per mile driven than any other age group.

A study at the University of Hawaii showed that drivers older than 75 were much more likely to be ticketed for certain offenses, such as failing to yield to pedestrians, backing up unsafely, and failing to stop at a flashing red light.

There are some physiological changes that occur with aging that contribute to these problems. Medical research has shown that most people after age 70 find it more difficult to make the twisting motion to look over their shoulder before changing lanes, that their eyes recover more slowly from glare, and that their reaction time slows. Also, older adults are more likely to be taking prescription medication that can affect their safe operation of motor vehicles.

### SAFE DRIVING REQUIRES COMPLEX SKILLS

While most older drivers limit themselves to driving in familiar areas during daylight hours, the most impaired drivers tend to be unaware of their physical and cognitive problems, and many continue driving until they cause a crash in which they or someone else is injured or killed. While certain driving skills are hard-fixed after years of driving, the safe operation of a vehicle requires a complex set of skills which can be impaired by age, illness or disability. Some of these skills are listed in the Chart "Safe Driving Skills" at the bottom of this page.

### HOW TO IDENTIFY IMPAIRED DRIVERS

Spouses and children of impaired drivers are usually the first to notice a decline in driving skills. These signs include getting lost while driving or being unable to find the car in a parking lot, needing many cues or directions from passengers, driving above or below the speed limit, being involved in or causing accidents, and having traffic citations.

Impaired drivers often deny that they have a problem handling the car. They may be unaware that their vision is inadequate to drive or that they are having near-misses while driving. Even when they realize that their driving has deteriorated, most are so dependent on their own car for transportation that they strongly resist giving up driving privileges.

### HOW TO INTERVENE WITH IMPAIRED DRIVERS

The first, and often least effective, method of getting impaired drivers to relinquish their license is to discuss their impairments and seek their cooperation. Individuals with dementia generally lack insight into their impairments in general, and usually deny that they are unable to drive safely. Older adults often become angry with their children when confronted with their impaired ability to drive, which can lead to unresolvable power struggles within a family.

The next tactic is to solicit the help of the impaired driver's doctor. Primary care physicians are often very reluctant to address the driving issue due to the fear of damaging their therapeutic relationship with their patients. If the impaired driver has a neurologist, psychiatrist or ophthalmologist, it may be possible to have one of these doctors tell the impaired driver to cease driving as they are not the primary physician and may have less at stake if the relationship is damaged as a result of the driving issues.

The third method of intervening with an impaired driver is to report the individual to the State of Minnesota Driver and Vehicle Services Department (DVSD). When the DVSD receives a letter from a physician stating that his/her patient should not be driving, the impaired driver is sent a letter stating that he or she is not physically qualified to drive and that their driving privileges have been cancelled. The reporting doctor's name is kept confidential;

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## SAFE DRIVING SKILLS

PHYSICAL SKILLS	JUDGEMENT	ABSTRACT THINKING
Having peripheral & forward vision and depth perception	Driving a safe speed for weather & conditions	Anticipating situations before they occur
Having ability to hear horns and emergency vehicle sirens	Gauging when to merge into traffic	Planning the route correctly
Having arm/shoulder mobility to handle steering wheel safely	Turning safely, especially left turns and onto freeways	Avoiding driving situations beyond ability
Having head and neck mobility to turn head as needed	Determining when to stop and when to go at signs and lights	Separating important traffic information from visual clutter
Having foot/leg mobility to manipulate pedals safely	Choosing parking sites which are within ability to park safely	Responding correctly to emergencies
Having adequate reflexes to respond to situations	Not driving when sedated or impaired by medication	Knowing when to avoid driving or to stop driving altogether

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in fact, the letter does not state that they were reported by a physician. Telling impaired drivers' physician that their identity will be protected should motivate physicians to report their patients who should no longer be driving.

When the DVSD receives a report from the general public, such as a spouse, child, home care nurse, attorney, another driver, etc., it sends a letter to the impaired driver stating that he or she must report to a specific driving evaluation station at a given time for evaluation of their driving skills. The name of the reporter is always kept confidential. The DVSD sends approximately 100 of these letters weekly in Minnesota, and approximately 65% to 75% of the impaired drivers show up for testing. Those who fail to appear are sent a letter stating that their driving privileges have been cancelled.

The evaluation process begins with an interview with a state driving evaluator. Based on the results of the interview, the evaluator can require that

the impaired driver do one or more of the following

- Obtain a letter from a doctor verifying ability to drive safely.
- Obtain an eye exam verifying that vision is adequate for driving.
- Take a written and/or road test.

Generally, the impaired driver is required to accomplish the requirements within four to six weeks. If they fail to produce the required documentation in a timely fashion, or if they fail the written or road test, they receive a letter stating that their driving privileges have been cancelled.

Reports of impaired drivers should be made in writing to:

Driver Evaluation  
Driver and Vehicle Services  
445 Minnesota Street, Suite 170  
St. Paul, MN 55101-5170

If the reporter has specific information regarding a disability, such as a medical report diagnosing dementia, an eye exam report showing impaired vision, etc., this information can be included with the report. Specific examples of unsafe driving behaviors should be included if possible.

## **HOW TO STOP IMPAIRED DRIVERS FROM DRIVING**

Unfortunately, cancellation of driving privileges doesn't mean that an impaired driver will stop driving. People with dementia often do not remember that they should not drive. And individuals who deny their impairments usually continue to drive anyway. Thus, it is usually necessary for the impaired driver's responsible party to remove access to the car.

Taking away the keys to the car may prevent future driving, but many people have other keys hidden away or are able to call the dealer or a locksmith and obtain new keys. Disabling the car by removing the distributor cap or letting the air out of the tires is a temporary solution, as the impaired driver can call a repair shop to put the car in drivable condition again.

The only completely effective solution is to remove the car so that the impaired driver does not have access to a vehicle. This may require the assistance of an attorney who can make sure that the impaired driver's rights are respected while complying with the need to stop the person from driving.