

Driving Safely for Older Adults

One of the most common dilemmas that patients and their families have regards the decision about whether or not it is time to stop or limit driving. There are many reasons that people worry about driving. Consider the following statistics:

- By the year 2020 more than 15% of drivers on the road will be age 65 or older.
- Drivers age 75 and older have the second highest accident rate of all drivers in the US, surpassed only by drivers under the age of 25.
- Accidents in drivers age 75 and older result in more than twice as many hospitalizations and deaths than in any other age group.
- The crash rate per mile driven is higher in the over 70 age group than for other older adults.
- Medical conditions and medications that can interfere with safe driving increase in frequency with aging.

On the other hand:

- Transportation options in many US communities are limited for those who cannot or do not drive, and are often too expensive for older adults.
- The inability to drive often leads to social isolation in older adults and can be perceived as creating an undue burden on families.

So what are the best ways to decide whether or not it may be time to stop driving? For many older adults it comes down to a sense of discomfort while driving; for others it is a sense of discomfort other people have while riding with them. Although these are good signs to be aware of and pay attention to, here are some other “warning signs” that it may be time to put away the keys:

- 1) New onset or worsening of any of the following medical conditions are associated with higher risk of driving: Alzheimer’s disease or other dementia, Parkinsons or other neurologic disorder, stroke, arthritis, diabetes, severe hearing loss and any form of visual impairment.
- 2) Current use or recent changes of any of the following medications can be associated with increased risk of driving: antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, antihistamines, muscle relaxants, other psychiatric agents, certain blood pressure medications, glaucoma medications, narcotic pain medications and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications.
- 3) Difficulty staying in the lane of travel.
- 4) More frequent dents and scrapes on the car or other places (fence, mailbox, garage doors, etc.)
- 5) Trouble judging gaps in traffic at intersections and on highway entrance/exit ramps.
- 6) Getting lost more often.
- 7) Trouble paying attention to or violating signals, road signs, and pavement markings.
- 8) Slower response to unexpected driving events.
- 9) Easily distracted or hard to concentrate while driving.
- 10) More traffic tickets or warnings by traffic or law enforcement officers in the last year.

So what does one do if they start seeing themselves in the warnings above? Well, if you feel you are ready and able to stop driving it may be the best decision. However if you aren't quite sure here are some options to give you more information:

- 1) Talk to your primary care doctor about your medical risks and medications. Consider asking your doctor for a referral for an OT driving evaluation.
- 2) Consider taking the AARP Driver Safety Program.
- 3) Talk to your family, chances are they have been thinking about this as well and can give you an honest opinion of their concerns.
- 4) Consider limiting your driving to day-time hours and familiar areas. Avoid high-risk times and areas such as rush hour traffic and school zones during school hours.