

When is a good time to stop driving?

Q: I am a 90 year old woman in good health. I have recently had some changes in my vision, however, and my eye doctor has begun talking to me about giving up driving. I am starting to feel a little uncomfortable, especially in heavy traffic, and I am no longer driving at night. When should I think about giving up driving?

A: You are not alone! A lot of seniors are asking themselves this question (and a lot of children worrying about it) especially during the winter months. The following are some symptoms that may indicate that it is time to give up driving:

- \$ Visual changes: difficulty reading road signs, difficulty recognizing someone you know from across the street or difficulty seeing lane lines, other vehicles or pedestrians.
- \$ Physical changes: difficulty turning head to look over your shoulder while changing lanes, difficulty moving your foot from the gas to brake, difficulty turning the steering wheel, unable to walk at least one block, unable to raise your arms above the level of the shoulder, or pain in knees, legs or ankles with walking up or down a flight of ten steps.
- \$ Attention and Reaction time changes: feeling overwhelmed in busy intersections, unable to judge gaps in traffic, taking certain medications that cause drowsiness (common offenders are antihistamines such as Benadryl, alcohol, benzodiazepines such as Ativan or Xanax, and certain antidepressants such as Amitriptyline and Paxil), getting lost or confused, experiencing dizziness, seizures or loss of consciousness, or slow in recognizing vehicles backing out of a driveway or slowing/stopping in front of you.
- \$ Other signs or symptoms that there may be problems: a friend or family member has concerns, getting lost on familiar routes, stopped by the police for poor driving behaviors, two or more moving violations, near misses or actual accidents in the last three years, or your doctor or other health care provider has advised you to stop driving.
- \$ Other things to consider are medical issues. Unstable heart conditions or recent heart attack (< 1 month ago), seizures within the last 6 months, recent stroke or mini-stroke (< 3 months ago), diabetics with recent episode of hypoglycemia (< 3 months ago), and dementia (Alzheimer's disease or others).

If you are not certain that this is really a problem there are specialized evaluations that look at the above concerns available through Occupational Therapy evaluations. Other options are behind the wheel evaluations, either privately or through the Department of Motor Vehicles, but they will not necessarily pick up on all the above issues and it may take months to get in. Lastly, most elderly drivers (unless there is a cognitive impairment) know when they feel it is time to give up driving. Listen to your own voice and make the choice that seems right to you, you'll probably be right.