

# Safe driving tips for older drivers

Driving can be more difficult for older adults due to a decrease in physical and mental health including visual, hearing, motor and cognitive (such as problem solving) abilities. Older adults who are in accidents recover less quickly and less fully than younger people which can lead to unnecessary dependency on others and most likely a stop to your driving.

By playing it safe, older adults can prevent accidents. Here are some tips that older adults practise to ensure their own safety and that of their passengers.

## Check your fitness to drive

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- Have your eyes and hearing tested regularly and wear those recommended glasses and hearing aids.
- If you are on medications, check to make sure it is safe to drive while taking them. Do not drive if you are tired and avoid long hours of continuous driving.
- Do not drive if you are emotionally upset.
- Keep your wits about you! As you drive, try the game “what if” to stay alert and mentally prepared for driving emergencies.
- Do exercises and stretches to improve your neck and body flexion so you can easily look around you when backing up, turning, etc.
- Drive only. Do not use a cell phone, eat, smoke, etc.

## Adjust your car

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- Wear your seatbelt.
- Adjust your seat and headrest for comfort, to prevent injury and improve viewing.
- Adjust your mirrors for a clear view.
- Ensure your visor can prevent glare.
- Keep all windows clear and clean, inside and out.
- Keep unnecessary noise to a minimum: radio, fan and passenger noise.
- Make sure your car is properly maintained.
- Make sure your car is safe to drive in adverse conditions (e.g., snow or rain).
- Consider purchasing or adapting your car for safety. [Click here for some considerations.](#)

## Drive in ideal conditions

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- Heavier traffic and fast moving highways may be more difficult. Consider alternative routes or take a re-fresher course or lesson.
- Avoid rush hour when you can.
- Difficult left turn? Try making three rights instead to decrease risk and get you going in the right direction.
- Heavy rain, wind, snow and ice make driving hazardous for everyone and avoid this if at all possible.
- Driving at night, dusk or dawn may be more difficult for those with poorer eyesight even when wearing glasses.

## Have your driving evaluated

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Driving is a skill of daily living that most people value. When injury, disease, illness or aging potentially affect your ability to drive, a comprehensive driving evaluation should be taken. These are different than screening tests to renew your licence. This type of evaluation helps to determine if your medical condition or age may be affecting your driving ability. An occupational therapist can help you determine if you should have your driving evaluated.

**There are two parts to a driving evaluation.**

## **Part one: Clinical evaluation**

The occupational therapist begins the evaluation by determining any effects that your medical condition, medications and functional limitations may have on the driving task.

- Visual screening is completed. This is a check to see that your eyes meet the minimum standards for driving in your province. As well, how you move your eyes, your ability to judge distance and how well you see out to the side when you keep your eyes straight ahead.
- The occupational therapist will also look at your arms and legs to see that you have enough movement and strength to control all of the features of the car. If you have some difficulties, adaptive equipment will be recommended to help you.
- Perceptual and cognitive abilities are evaluated by measuring your reaction time, seeing how you can pay attention to more than one thing at a time and completing some thinking skill tests to check your memory, problem solving abilities and how well your brain can interpret what you see.
- The occupational therapist also takes a driving history, notes the type of vehicle driven, and discusses potential adaptive driving equipment.

## **Part two: On-road evaluation**

All aspects of the driving task are assessed:

- Physical ability and endurance.
- Cognitive/behavioural skills. For example, your ability to be aware of potential hazards.
- Visual/perceptual skills. For example, how effectively you use your eyes, look around when you drive and take in the information you see, make sense of it and act appropriately.
- All responses to the traffic environments. For example, your ability to handle unusual situations, how you handle pedestrians, ability to cope with busy traffic areas or even the expressway.

Based on all the information gathered during both parts of the evaluation, the occupational therapist, usually in collaboration with a driver instructor, interprets results and makes recommendations based on performance strengths and limitations as well as on driving potential.

## **Take a driver refresher course**

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Many formal and informal driver refresher courses are available. There is some evidence that indicates that refresher courses that include an on road (driving) component are more useful than those that do not.

Taking a refresher course, such as sessions offered by the Canadian Automobile Association or the 55Alive program, will provide information about signs that driving is no longer safe, conditions and behaviours that may affect the ability to drive safely and strategies to enhance safe driving abilities. Some organizations provide an on-road evaluation that helps drivers pinpoint aspects of driving that are problematic.

While we don't know how much effect these courses will have on driving in the long term, gaining this information may help older drivers and their families identify signs that driving is no longer safe and strategies that can be used to enhance safe driving skills.

## **Prepare for driving retirement**

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There may come a time when you no longer feel safe to drive or you may be told that you can no longer drive. All drivers must consider that their ability to drive may not continue throughout the lifespan. Before the effects of aging influence the ability to drive safely, older adults should start the transition to driving retirement and consider the mobility options that will suit their needs within their community.

## Explore options for alternate transportation

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A growing number of communities are exploring transportation alternatives such as; public transit, community shuttles, taxis, car hire services, specialized transit for seniors, volunteer drivers and community rideshare groups.

It is recommended that older drivers become familiar and comfortable with alternative transportation in their region. If alternative transportation methods are not available, you and your family should consider contacting your regional government or seniors' organizations to advocate for more transportation options.

While the ability to drive may no longer be an option, all members of a community have the right to some form of transportation and should lobby for access to cost-effective and accessible transportation services.

