



TALKING WITH OLDER DRIVERS



A GUIDE FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

PREFACE

Since its invention in the early 1900s, Americans have become increasingly dependent on the automobile for transportation. It has brought freedom of movement and independence for the young and old alike. It is especially important in suburban and rural areas, where there are few alternatives to the personal automobile for transportation needs.

In recent years, perhaps because of the growing numbers of older drivers and the complexity of driving in some areas, more concern has been expressed by families and friends about the safety of an older driver they know.

Decisions about driving are very important, but often difficult for older people to make alone. This booklet will help you, as a family member or friend, know when and how to get involved in an older person's decision on whether to continue or modify their driving.

Suggestions are given on where to go for more information as you help your parent, grandparent or friend make informed decisions about driving.



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Contents of this document were developed with assistance from the Mature Drivers Task Force, a coalition of organizations, advocating for the health, highway-safety and transportation interests and needs of older Pennsylvanians.

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The Department of Aging's TT number is (717) 772-0725.

The Department of Transportation's TT number is (717) 412-5380.



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT OLDER DRIVERS FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS

Q What can I, as a family member or friend, do if I am concerned about the driving ability and safety of someone older who continues to drive a car?

A First, recognize that driving is very important because it is usually our primary means of getting around. Second, if there are other family members or friends available, talk with them to see if they have made some of the same observations and discuss how you may be able to help the driver, using the information in this booklet.

Q What resources can I suggest to an older driver to help refresh driving skills?

A The section of this booklet, MOVING RIGHT ALONG: HELPFUL TIPS FOR OLDER DRIVERS, suggests ways to avoid some of the more hazardous driving situations. The KEY CONTACTS AND RESOURCES section at the end of this brochure lists the organizations that offer driver refresher courses for anyone 55 years of age and older. Also listed are sources for booklets and pamphlets that offer tips for safe driving and walking.

Another option is to take lessons with a private instructor, who may be able to help with improving the driver's habits. Consult the Yellow Pages of the telephone directory for the name and number of a driving instructor or school.

Q To whom can I talk about changes in an older driver's vision or hearing and how these changes may affect driving skills?

A The WARNING SIGNS section of this booklet discusses the importance of vision and hearing for driving. If the driver has not had a vision exam within the past year, suggest a visit to an eye doctor. If hearing is a concern, the driver should see an audiologist.

Q How can an older driver learn more about discounts, benefits, special provisions and reduced fare (or free) transit?

A A brochure available from the Department of Aging or your area agency on aging—"Getting Older...And Going Places"—provides a summary. The driver's insurance agent, or organizations that offer mature driver refresher courses, can tell you how one qualifies for a premium discount. See KEY CONTACTS AND RESOURCES at the end of this booklet.

Q Have there been changes in traffic laws or rules that an older driver should know about?

A Yes, there have been recent changes that all drivers should know about. To find out about these changes, request “**The Pennsylvania Driver’s Manual**” from any Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) driver license center, district office or county maintenance office, usually listed under "Transportation" in the Blue Pages or from our Web site at: www.dmv.state.pa.us.

Q How does PennDOT determine when an older person needs a physical, vision or driver’s exam in order to have a license renewed?

A There are several ways PennDOT determines when a driver should be tested:

1) Medically incapacitated drivers of all ages may be identified by doctors. By law, all physicians, and others authorized to diagnose and treat disorders and disabilities, must report to PennDOT every person diagnosed as having a condition that could impair his ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.

2) Police and accident reports on drivers of all ages also help PennDOT determine who should be evaluated, and PennDOT may request medical or driver’s exams for those reported.

Also, PennDOT receives letters from concerned family members and others. Drivers identified through these letters may be asked to complete an examination.

3) Each month, 1,900 drivers over the age of 45 are chosen at random for retesting at the time of license renewal and required to undergo vision and physical exams by doctors of their own choice. If the results of those exams suggest a need, the driver will also be required to take a driver’s examination. PennDOT has found that less than 1 percent of the selected drivers need to take the driver’s exam.

Q What are some of the reasons for denying a license renewal or recalling a license?

A When PennDOT receives medical information from a doctor, it starts an evaluation process. Based on the information submitted, one or more of the following may occur: 1) Restrictions to the person’s driving privilege may be added or deleted; 2) The person’s license may be recalled or restored; 3) The person may be asked to pro-

vide more specific medical information; 4) The person may be asked to complete a driver's examination; or 5) No action may be taken. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, not the physician, makes the license determination.

Q

Is there an appeals process?

A

Yes, the driver may appeal through the Court of Common Pleas in the county of residence.

Q

What is a "graduated" license?

A

A graduated license is a type of license consideration somewhere between full privilege and no privilege. PennDOT offers a low vision restricted license to drivers with vision between 20/70 and 20/100. These drivers are limited to driving during daylight hours on roads other than freeways. PennDOT may also limit these drivers to driving within a certain geographic area as determined on a case-by-case basis.

For more information, please contact:

The Bureau of Driver Licensing
P.O. Box 68682 • Harrisburg, PA 17106-8682
or call (717) 412-5300, or toll free 1 (800) 932-4600

Q

What can family members and friends do when a driver continues to drive against the advice of his doctor and others?

A

Using tricks—like hiding keys—to reduce driving is not recommended. It is better to maintain a sense of trust in your relationship, being honest and persistent. Encourage the person to make a decision to reduce or stop driving as appropriate. Be aware that persons who lose the privilege of driving often feel lonely or anxious because they have fewer opportunities to be with friends or involved in activities.

If the driver will not listen to reason, you may want to discuss the problem with his/her doctor to find out if there are medical reasons that should be reported. The doctor may also decide to refer the older person to a driving clinic to help make a more accurate judgment.

If you decide your only choice is to report the case to PennDOT to make a determination, call (717) 787-9664, or write:

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
P.O. Box 68682 • Harrisburg, PA 17106-8682

The older driver may be required to take a medical or drivers exam, or both.

Q If a family member, a friend or a physician reports an unsafe driver to PennDOT, will they tell the driver who reported them?

A Reports submitted to PennDOT are confidential and used solely to determine the qualification of an individual to drive a motor vehicle. PennDOT actively supports this provision and will not release information regarding the source or content of the report, even when the inquiry is from the patient or driver reported. However, if the driver's license is not renewed or is recalled and the driver appeals through the judicial system, the report may be admitted as evidence.

Q If an older driver stops driving, what alternative means of transportation are available?

A Older Pennsylvanians are eligible for the Free Transit Program for Older Persons, where available, and the Shared Ride Program. For more information, contact your Agency on Aging, listed in the blue pages of the telephone directory, or the local Shared Ride provider. You may also contact the Shared Ride Program, Bureau of Public Transportation, 400 North Street, Harrisburg, PA 17105-3151 (717) 783-8025. Other driving alternatives are listed under KEY CONTACTS AND RESOURCES at the end of this brochure.

You may also want to work out a plan for family and friends to provide transportation for the older person, as needed.

Be sensitive to the older person's feelings at this time. Expect some emotional reactions, and do what you can to help the person express feelings and adjust to changes. Not driving a car may be seen as a loss of independence and can build on previous losses such as the loss of a spouse, friends or health.

Q What can a person without a driver's license use for identification?

A A special identification card, similar in appearance to a driver's license, is available to Pennsylvania drivers who voluntarily give up their licenses. The first issuance of the I.D. Card is free to drivers who must give up their licenses for medical reasons. It is available through any PennDOT Driver License Center.



WARNING SIGNS

There are a number of common physical changes that may occur with age and may affect driving. As we age, our reflexes often slow down. Our eyes, ears and brain may not react to or anticipate events like before. This happens to everyone in varying degrees, and we all have to make adjustments. Here are some of the changes you may want to discuss with an older family member or friend:

VISION

Good vision is essential to safe driving. Experts believe 90 percent of the information we need to drive comes through our eyes. But over time nearly everyone's vision declines. An older person may notice difficulties focusing on objects and switching focus from near to far or far to near. The ability to see fine detail may diminish.

Peripheral vision, the ability to see things to the side without turning one's head, may also change with age. This is significant, since about 98 percent of what we see when we drive is seen first peripherally. Driving at night may become more difficult because the older driver can't see as clearly. This is common. When we get older, we need more light to see as clearly as before. An older driver may also find it harder to adjust to glare from approaching headlights and may notice a weakening in depth perception (i.e., the ability to judge distances).

Vision problems should be checked by an eye care professional. Some of the risks can be decreased by simply changing a few driving habits, like limiting night driving.

HEARING

Some hearing loss is common among people age 65 and older. High-pitched sounds may become less audible long before low-pitched ones do. This is important because horns, sirens and train whistles are high pitched. Studies show people who have hearing difficulties are more likely to be inattentive to their surroundings. Family or friends who suspect an older person doesn't hear well should recommend a hearing exam and offer to go with the older person to get one.

MENTAL FUNCTIONS:

One of the crucial functions of safe driving is “reaction time”— the time it takes for the eyes to see and the brain to process what is seen and tell the body how to react. “Reaction time” slows with age, but an older driver can compensate by keeping a good distance from the car ahead and avoiding rush-hour traffic.

Processing new information and making quick judgments are essential skills in driving, but they can become impaired, as in the early stages of dementia. Family and friends should be aware that these changes may occur, and help the older driver recognize the changes and make alternative transportation choices.

HEALTH/MEDICATIONS:

Arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, nervous disorders—all can affect driving, so it’s important to have regular medical checkups. Even with a medical problem, older drivers may still be able to drive safely, as long as they follow doctors’ instructions. More serious medical problems might restrict the ability to drive safely.

Medications can affect driving ability at any age, but especially for an older person. Even over-the-counter medicines can have adverse and unplanned side effects. Anyone taking a prescription or over-the-counter medicines should ask a doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of medication, especially as they relate to driving.

Of course, anyone taking medication should avoid alcoholic beverages and should follow directions that advise against driving when taking certain medications.

TAKE NOTE:

It is important to understand that even after taking steps to correct diminished eyesight or hearing, and even after successfully avoiding adverse reactions to medication, an older person still may not feel comfortable behind the wheel. Encourage the older person to discuss this with you, another family member or friend, or a doctor. As a family member or friend of an older person, you must be sensitive to this insecurity and help the older adult find solutions to this problem.



MOVING RIGHT ALONG. . . HELPFUL TIPS FOR OLDER DRIVERS:

Let's say the older driver doesn't have any impairments that affect driving. There are still a number of safe-driving habits that should be routine. These are true at any age, so if you are assisting an older relative or friend to improve his driving habits, you might want to heed the following advice as well.

- ✓ Planning ahead, especially for a long trip, is a key to safe driving.
- ✓ Don't like night driving? Plan any lengthy car trips for daylight hours. Morning may be best because most people are not as tired as they might be in the afternoon. It might also be advisable for the older person to run errands in the morning, fresh from a good night's sleep.
- ✓ Hate rush-hour traffic? Driving after 9 a.m. or before 5 p.m. is advisable. Know what roads near home are most congested during rush hour and avoid them.
- ✓ When driving long distances, especially in winter, call ahead for weather and road condition updates.
- ✓ When traveling over unfamiliar roads, use marked maps available from travel clubs, or mark your own map. It is also advisable to calculate the distance and expected time of arrival at the intermediate points or route changes on the trip. It might also help to list route changes, town names, or landmarks in order on a sheet of paper and check each one off as they are reached.
- ✓ When traveling with others, assign a navigator, to check off landmarks as you pass them, consult the map to make sure you are on course or read directions aloud.
- ✓ Look ahead. Good drivers get a jump on trouble by looking far down the road and making adjustments before encountering problems that may involve other vehicles, pedestrians, bicyclists or animals. A driver who makes a lot of quick stops is not looking far enough down the road.
- ✓ Maintain a safe speed. This depends on what the road is like, how well the driver can see, how much traffic there is and how fast traffic is moving.
- ✓ Communicate with other drivers. Use lights, headlights, brakes, hazard lights and turn signals; also don't hesitate to use the horn.
- ✓ A driver should always keep a safe distance from the vehicle ahead.

Even an older driver who passes a driver’s exam today may not be completely comfortable behind the wheel. Here are some questions you may want to ask an older driver:

Do you feel less comfortable driving now than you did five years ago?

Have you had more near-accidents in the last year or so?

Do intersections bother you because of all the cars and activity in several directions?

Is it harder to judge the distance and speed of cars when you merge into traffic?

Is night driving more difficult because of glare and blurred vision?

If an older driver answers “yes” to one or more of the above questions, suggest that he or she enrolls in a driver refresher course or visits a physician.



KEY CONTACTS, RESOURCES AND BENEFITS

Here are some organizations and resources that can help older drivers, their families and friends get more information on safe driving or get answers about alternatives to driving.

DRIVER REFRESHER COURSES:

The following agencies conduct state approved classroom training courses for mature drivers. There are no written or practical driving tests required. The course fees are moderate, but vary with each agency:

- ✓ **The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)** offers “55-Alive,” an 8-hour instructional program to improve the driving ability of older adults. Contact the AARP state office at 225 Market Street, Harrisburg, PA 17101; (717) 238-2277 or via the Web site at www.aarp.org.
- ✓ **American Automobile Association.** Contact your local AAA office for availability or visit our Web site at www.aaa.com.
- ✓ **National Safety Council.** Call 1-800-345-9772 or (412) 856-5400 for more information or visit our Web site at www.nsc.org.
- ✓ **Seniors for Safe Driving.** Call 1-800-559-4880 or visit our Web site at www.sfsd-pa.com for availability.

Or for more information, you may contact:

- ✓ **Pennsylvania Department of Transportation**, Bureau of Driver Licensing, P.O. Box 68682, Harrisburg, PA 17106-8682.
Call (717) 412-5300 or toll free 1-800-932-4600 or visit our Web site at www.dmv.state.pa.us.

Successful completion of a mature driver improvement course may qualify you for a 5% discount on your car insurance. Consult your insurance agent for details.

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION MATERIALS:

“Drive Smart and Drive Longer, Tips for the Older Driver.” Available from PennDOT, this booklet discusses the leading cause of accidents involving older adults. Also available from PennDOT: “Truck Smart,” a pamphlet concerning safety tips for sharing the road with trucks. Both are available free by contacting PennDOT at (717) 787-6853.

“The Pennsylvania Driver’s Manual.” There have been a number of changes in driver and traffic regulations in recent years; changes you should know about. Manuals are available at any driver license center or PennDOT district office. Check your telephone directory under “Automobile” or “Transportation” to locate the office nearest you.

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF AGING MATERIALS:

“Getting Older...And Going Places!” gives a brief description of benefits for older drivers and riders, eligibility information and who to contact.

Your local area agency on aging may be able to assist you in obtaining older driver improvement information or materials, or help you find alternative transportation. To contact the agency nearest you, consult the blue pages of your telephone directory.

AARP MATERIALS FOR OLDER DRIVERS:

“Older Driver Skill Assessment and Resource Guide—Creating Mobility Choices.” This booklet helps the driver measure reaction time, learn about unsafe driving habits, and tips on ensuring car safety. It has a vision test to pick up potential driving problems, and a quiz to determine if driving is becoming a problem. Contact the state AARP office at 30 North Third Street, Suite 750, Harrisburg, PA 17101; or call (717) 238-2277 for more information on this and other driver assessment and improvement materials.

“Take Control of Your Driving Future—Staying Safe As You Grow Older.” This booklet discusses a research study by AARP and ITT Hartford. It contains a quiz to assess accident risk, a visual contrast sensitivity test and tips to improve driving.

“Safety Steps for Pedestrians—A Program to Promote Safe Walking for Older Persons.” Drivers are not the only ones who need to know “the rules of the road.” This publication offers tips for walking smart and safe.

“See Safe Driving in a New Light.” A self-test of your ability to see in low light situations.

“Getting Around—Driving and Other Options.” A valuable resource for anyone considering giving up driving.

AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION (AAA) MATERIALS:

The American Automobile Association Foundation for Traffic Safety has a 16-page self assessment booklet entitled **“Drivers 55 Plus: Test Your Own Performance.”** This booklet can help you assess your ability to drive. The cost is \$2.00. Write to the foundation at: 1440 New York Avenue, Suite 201, Washington, DC 20005.

AAA also offers a publication entitled **“Concerned About An Older Driver? A Guide for Families and Friends.”** Cost \$2.00.

“Rx for Safe Driving” is also available through the AAA. This pamphlet discusses the effects of medication on driving. It is available from AAA Corporate Communications, 1000 AAA Drive, Heathrow, FL 32746-5063.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

“The Aging Process and Driving Safety” is available from GM Corporate Relations, 11-57 General Motors Building, Detroit, MI 48202. This pamphlet discusses considerations for the older driver.

“Driving Tips for Older Adults” is available from the American Optometric Association, 243 N. Lindbergh Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63141. This pamphlet discusses vision changes, the effect of drugs on driving, the decision to drive, and advice for the older driver.

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