



Aging and Driving

Staying Safe on the Road

Normal aging affects driving ability. But getting older does not necessarily mean it's time to give up the car keys. A clinical assessment may be useful in identifying driving difficulties.

By Jean L. Nickels, M.D.

Driving gives us mobility, freedom and independence. In such an automobile-centric culture as ours, we rely heavily on our cars to maintain control over our time and lifestyle, whether for work, social, health, or daily living needs.

As we age, however, there is a natural slowing of physical movement, a decline in vision, and a decrease in attention and reaction time. A prolonged illness or injury can also add physical and cognitive challenges to driving. While everyone wants to keep driving for as long as possible, no one wants to be a threat to themselves or to others because they are no longer able to drive safely.

Assessing Driving Fitness

But how do you know if driving safely is a potential issue? Begin by

asking yourself some questions:

- Do you have problems reading street signs or recognizing someone you know?
- Do you experience difficulty with glare from oncoming headlights at night?
- Are you able to look over your shoulder when changing lanes?
- Are you able to keep your foot on the brake pedal and press firmly to prevent the vehicle from rolling while you wait at a traffic light?
- Have you fallen twice or more in the previous year?
- Can you raise your arms above your shoulders?
- Do you find that gaps in traffic are harder to judge, making it more difficult to turn left at intersections or to merge with traffic when turning right?

While these questions may not be easily answered, beginning with an honest assessment of how you're feeling and reacting to situations is the first step to taking charge of your driving ability.

What can you do?

First, if you're experiencing any pain or severe difficulty with your vision, or any other physical problems, see your doctor. An examination by your physician is important to assess, evaluate and treat any problems you may have. Some of these problems may affect your driving.

A skilled driver rehabilitation specialist can help you learn how to cope with a variety of age-related driving challenges. They can also assist you in finding the right vehicle and adaptive equipment to make driving safe, easy, and comfortable again.

Simulation assessment and training may also help pinpoint driving skills or cognitive challenges that need attention. While this resource is a new tool for driving evaluation and training, simulation – or virtual reality – has been used for years to effectively train aviation and military personnel. Simulation offers a confidence-building, low-stress environment to assess driving skills in a private setting. This may include driving in busy city traffic, on expressways, at night, in adverse weather conditions, and in other risky situations.

It's not always obvious when a general health problem, vision problem, or side effect of medication will lead to a driving impairment. That's when the observations of loved ones and health professionals are so important.

Above all, the key to driving safely while aging with grace is self-awareness. When you accurately assess your driving fitness, you can adjust your driving habits and stay safe on the road for many years.