

THE IMPAIRED OLDER DRIVER – WHEN AND HOW TO INTERVENE

When is it no longer safe for an older person to drive? Advanced age alone is not the determining factor. It depends on one's overall physical and cognitive abilities to perform the complex functions necessary to safely drive. It also may depend upon the willingness of the older person to modify driving habits to compensate for his/her limitations. Family members should be concerned when they observe the older driver doing any of the following:

- * Getting lost in familiar areas
- * Ignoring traffic signs and signals
- * Misjudging distances (driving over curbs, straddling lanes, making wide turns, etc.)
- * Using poor judgment (cutting off other drivers, not yielding right-of-way, etc.)
- * Reacting dangerously slow to driving emergencies
- * Inattentiveness or falling asleep behind the wheel
- * Becoming easily angered or agitated when driving

If family members observe any of these signs, they should have the person's driving skills professionally evaluated, or take steps themselves to stop the person from driving. Ignoring the problem will not make it go away. Impaired drivers are a menace to everyone on the road, including themselves. Should an impaired driver cause a serious accident, family members who were aware of the risks, but chose not to intervene, will likely experience tremendous guilt, and could potentially face legal action themselves.

Still, it is very difficult for family members to challenge an older person who is driving unsafely, and they may rationalize in many ways to avoid taking on such a responsibility. Do any of the following thoughts sound familiar?

"The police will probably stop Dad and take away his license."

Surprisingly, this rarely happens. Even if a driver is ticketed for careless driving or for causing an accident, his/her license is usually not suspended unless testing shows them to be intoxicated. Nor do the police automatically notify the Department of Motor Vehicles about a possibly unsafe driver.

"Mom has to renew her license in 6 months. She'll probably flunk the test and her license will be suspended."

Wrong again. In Nebraska, one can renew their driver's license on-line up to the age of 72 without having to submit to vision or written examinations. If Mom renews her license in person, she may only be required to pass a vision test. A person may fail and then repeat the written test multiple times. Some examiners have even reportedly read the questions to persons who seem confused by written questions. Even with these "warning flags", examiners will not always test a person's actual in-car driving skills. Unless the person carries a restricted license, he/she is not required to renew their license for five years.

"Grandpa can just increase his auto liability insurance to cover any accidents."

This takes for granted that any accident(s) he has will be minor and cause no bodily injury. Sadly, that is not always the case. Insurance companies increasingly refuse to write large policies for older drivers, and may be quick to cancel an older driver's policy, particularly if he/she has repeated accidents. Injured parties may file civil suits against the older driver for an amount in excess of the insurance coverage, thereby tying up his/her assets (and the family inheritance) for many years. Law suits could be filed against family members who knowingly allow an impaired person to drive.

"Mom lives in a small town (or in the country). She only drives to and from the store. There's not much traffic and other drivers watch out for her."

Statistically, most auto accidents occur within a mile of a person's home. Suppose Mom drives through a crosswalk striking pedestrians? Suppose she makes a wrong turn or encounters a detour, then gets lost and drives out into the country? The media frequently reports stories of confused older drivers who disappear and turn up hundreds of miles from home. Occasionally, lost older drivers are the subject of intensive search efforts, only to be found dead in an isolated area months later.

"It would just kill Dad if he couldn't drive."

Most of us modify our driving as we age. We avoid driving at night or in bad weather. We drive less often and stay closer to familiar surroundings. While it can be very upsetting for an older person to give up driving completely, they will adjust - just as they have adjusted to other challenges in their life. But a serious accident could kill Dad (and perhaps many innocent people) more surely than would his giving up the car keys.

Counseling may be helpful to overcome the grief one feels at giving up driving. The loss of driving privileges can be compensated for by transportation from family, friends, church and community volunteers, taxi cabs and other transportation programs. More service providers are willing to come to a person's home to conduct business, and most essentials such as groceries and prescription medicines can be delivered.

WHEN AND HOW SHOULD A FAMILY INTERVENE?

First, determine if there is truly a problem with the older person's driving skills. You or another family member should ride with the older driver at least once every few months to monitor how well or poorly he/she drives. It's easy to assume the person drives safely just because they haven't had an accident. After completing each ride-along, you should ask yourself whether you would feel comfortable riding with the older person again. Then, ask yourself a truly tough question, "Would I permit my child - or my grandchild - to ride with this person?" If the answer is no, the time to intervene has come.

WHAT STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES CAN A FAMILY USE TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF AN IMPAIRED OLDER DRIVER?

A starting point should be for the older person to undergo a complete physical exam to determine if there are medical problems which impact driving safety. (Be sure to discuss family concerns about driving with the doctor in advance so that he/she will know why the exam is being requested). Vision and hearing deficits, arthritis in the neck or spine that restricts head and arm movement, and medications that impair alertness are a few of many problems that may be improved or eliminated with medical intervention. The doctor can also be prepared to address the issue of driving directly with the person after the examination. A firm directive from a medical or eye physician, along with a written prescription to stop driving will often be reluctantly accepted.

When a "second opinion" is desired to test driving abilities, the following programs in Nebraska provide a professional and comprehensive evaluation of one's driving skills:

CHI Health	6901 N. 72 nd St.	402-572-3055
https://www.chihealth.com/services/rehabilitation/outpatient-rehabilitation/driver-rehabilitation-program		

Madonna Therapy Plus	https://www.madonna.org/programs/occupational-therapy/	
	17500 Burke St., Omaha	402-401-3000
	5401 South St., Lincoln, NE	1-402-413-3000

Methodist Health System	8303 W. Dodge Rd.	402-354-4670
https://bestcare.org/specialties/physical-therapy/driver-rehabilitation		

Regional West Medical Center Rehabilitation Center	1-308-630-1355
3911 Avenue B, Suite G-200, Scottsbluff, NE	
https://www.rwhs.org/services/rehabilitation-pain/rehab-center/occupational-therapy	

These programs test vision, reflexes, judgment, and knowledge, and observe actual driving skills. They provide refresher training, access to adaptive equipment for the car, and will counsel the person to restrict or stop driving if necessary.

HOW TO REQUEST INVOLUNTARY RE-EXAMINATION OF AN UNSAFE DRIVER:

What if the unsafe driver insists upon driving against medical advice, or refuses to undergo a formal driving evaluation? This response is common in persons whose perceptions and judgment are clouded by memory loss or an emotional disorder. In this situation, the family must pursue the issue in a more direct way.

IN NEBRASKA, A family member or friend, a law enforcement officer, or any concerned citizen may contact the Nebraska Dept. of Motor Vehicles with specific concerns and questions.

Nebraska Dept. of Motor Vehicles, Driver's Licensing Division	1-402-471-3861
https://dmv.nebraska.gov/dl/contact	

If the Department of Motor Vehicles is sufficiently concerned that an individual may be incapable of safely operating a motor vehicle, it will request that the person appear before Driver Licensing Staff on a specified date and time for reexamination.

The person will be required to furnish a statement by a licensed physician regarding medical history and present condition as it pertains to their driving ability. A visual acuity statement from an optometrist or ophthalmologist may also be required.

The person will be asked to take and successfully pass both a written and a driving test.

<https://dmv.nebraska.gov/dl/license-cancellation>

Failure to report for an examination, or to submit the required medical or vision statement, or to pass required written and driving tests, will result in the driver's license being cancelled.

IN IOWA, a letter may be sent by any concerned citizen (family member or friend, physician, law enforcement officer, etc.) to the Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT) identifying the impaired driver, and stating specific concerns about the person's driving skills. It must be signed and include the sender's full address and phone number. In lieu of a personal letter, a **Citizen Re-Examination Report** may be completed on-line and downloaded from IDOT at:

<https://iowadot.gov/mvd/driverslicense/Retiring-from-driving/Concerned-for-a-loved-ones-safety-when-driving>

This letter or downloaded report form should be mailed or faxed to:

Iowa Department of Transportation
Driver and Identification Services
P.O. Box 9204
Des Moines, IA 50306-9204

Ph: 1-515-244-8725
Fax: 1-515-239-1837

The driver in question is then notified in writing by IDOT that he/she has 30 days to obtain a physician's clearance to drive, and then pass vision, written and driving tests, or their driver's license will be suspended.

If the impaired driver has previously executed a Durable Power of Attorney document, giving a family member the power to manage their finances and health care decisions in the event of incapacity, that family member should pursue activating the power of attorney. A written statement by the impaired driver's physician that documents diminished physical, mental or cognitive capacity is required to activate the Durable Power of Attorney. Once it is activated, the family member may legally dispose of the vehicle.

If the car must remain available for use by another member of the household, steps should be taken to secure all sets of car keys. If necessary, the car can be temporarily disabled or parked somewhere out of sight when not in use.

Whatever strategy the family ultimately chooses, they should first discuss their concerns directly with the older driver. The approach should be firm, yet with reassurance of the family's continued love and support. It should also include a workable plan to meet the person's transportation needs.

You may download and print a copy of this and other patient education documents from the resources link on our Internet web site: <https://www.nebraskamed.com/geriatrics/resources>

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