

# Putting the Brakes on Risky Driving

For nearly every older person, the idea of permanently giving up driving is one of the most dreaded milestones imaginable! Driving is deeply connected to our sense of independence and freedom. Without a car, your parents will have trouble getting to the grocery store, doctor's office, a friend's house or department store sale. It's only natural that any suggestion about putting the brakes on driving can be met with resistance and fear.

## Facts about aging & driving

Research shows that age alone is not a good predictor of driving safety or ability. Even so, many stereotypes and myths surround older drivers. Some people believe older people have more car accidents than younger drivers. In reality, people under age 24 have four times the number of collisions as those who are over 65.

Older drivers not only have fewer crashes and less moving violations than younger adults, they make excellent safety choices — they wear their seatbelts, don't drive impaired by alcohol, don't tailgate and are less likely to drive at night. In fact, the rate of accidents doesn't actually increase until after the age of 80.

## Red flags

Studies show how medical illnesses and declining function impact older drivers.

According to researchers, the following events can predict when a person will have difficulty:

- Experiencing a fall in the past one to two years
- Developing vision problems
- Showing signs of cognitive decline
- A prior history of motor vehicle crashes
- Current use of certain medications that can cause dizziness, drowsiness and confusion

## The challenge

Despite the fact that most older people have pretty good safety records, there may come a time when you notice things are changing; mom's or dad's driving ability isn't what it used to be. Maybe you've noticed some memory problems and some new scrapes or dents in the car. You begin to worry about your parents' safety and the safety of others on the road. Your gut tells you it's time to suggest that your parents park the car for good, but you're unsure about how to broach the subject and worry about how your parents will react.

## Talking about risky driving

Ideally, you should have that first conversation about driving safety with your parent before it becomes a serious problem. This can help establish an open dialogue, allow your family to plan ahead for the future and give your parent time to evaluate his or her own skills and make some changes if necessary.

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## Putting the Brakes on Risky Driving (cont'd)

Sound easier said than done? Many families feel lost when it comes to dealing with driving concerns. A study in New York State found that over 70 percent of family members who were concerned about an older person's driving had been worried for a year or more. They reported noticing damage to the car, hearing negative comments from passengers or being aware of an accident. Half of the families said their loved one was having difficulty with activities of daily living such as trouble bathing, dressing, taking medication or preparing meals independently.

The majority of family members worried about a loved one said they felt unable to discuss the problem or intervene in any way to prevent the person from driving despite having serious concerns about safety. Family members cited two major reasons for not talking to their loved ones about driving concerns:

- Taking away independence was a hard thing to do to someone they cared about
- They worried their parent would never forgive them for intervening

Though this is an emotionally charged topic, family members should not postpone tough conversations because they anticipate feeling guilty. Keep in mind: *it's more important to avoid accidents or death than to avoid talking about unpleasant and difficult issues.*

Before your conversation about retiring the car keys — and it may take several — do your homework. Be sure you observe your relative's driving over time, noticing and writing down any problems you see. Next, tell your parent's physician of your concerns. Finally, work with a geriatric care manager to help you begin and follow through with conversations. Your care manager can also help you find transportation alternatives and provide hopeful solutions so that retiring the keys is easier for your parent.

### The transition to passenger

Making the transition from driver to passenger is a big step and isn't always easy or smooth. Sensitivity to the other person's feelings goes a long way in making the process easier for everyone. Many people report feeling sad or depressed after conversations about parking their car for good, even if they agree with the assessment of their driving abilities. This is understandable, since giving up one's driving privileges brings up lots of questions, fears and challenges. Will I be able to get out of the house as often? I hate being dependent on other people; how will I manage? How will I see my friends? Will my family see me as just another burden?

Taking this necessary step is made harder when there are very few community resources to assist a relative in getting to where they need to go safely and efficiently.

A care manager can help you and your soon to be car-less parents tap into available services and come up with creative ideas for getting around town, to help them avoid being isolated and shut-in their home all alone.

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## Putting the Brakes on Risky Driving (cont'd)

### Refusing to yield!

If a risky driver continues to drive despite pleas to stop, family members should talk to a professional like a geriatric care manager or their parent's physician for guidance about what to do next.

### How a care manager can help you

A care manager is a very valuable asset to families struggling with driving safety issues. She can:

- Share practical ideas that can make retiring the keys easier
- Be a sounding board and problem solver when personal frustration or family tension is interfering with anyone's sense of well being
- Facilitate important family discussions
- Help families understand and utilize the Washington Department of Licensing reexamination procedure if necessary
- Locate and coordinate valuable services to help the older driver make a smooth transition from driver to passenger
- Transport clients to medical appointments and help advocate for the older person
- Complete cognitive screening evaluations. This helps families better understand their older relative's abilities and assists her physician to determine if she can continue to drive safely
- Help your family explore alternative housing options where services and public transportation are more easily accessed on foot, or assisted living communities with available transportation services

Putting the brakes on risky driving is a real challenge, but with a geriatric care manager's help, the transition can be much smoother.

### Sources

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