

# Hanging Up the Keys?



Options When Driving Retirement  
Becomes a Crisis



## **To the Professional**

This guide was developed to assist families in crisis to better understand the current level of risk for their older driver. It is not intended to be an exhaustive resource, but to offer the information needed to make an informed decision about the next step to take. Your role is to help develop a broader base of knowledge about the options available in their area. Some older adults may benefit from an evaluation by a health professional or specialist (e.g. geriatrician, neurologist, social worker), or a driving specialist, such as an occupational therapist or a certified driver rehabilitation specialist (CDRS). If the cost of an evaluation is not prohibitive, this is the best way to have the driver's current abilities formally assessed. You can also help by referring the family to the transportation options that are available locally.

## **About This Guide**

This guide is intended to help readers better understand their current situation of an older driver and direct them to other, more comprehensive resources available. It is not intended to offer legal advice or medical diagnoses. As each individual situation requires its own consideration and resolution, readers are advised to contact the appropriate professionals. The "Additional Resources" section on the back cover offers resources that can provide additional information and support services.

This project was funded, in part, through the National Center on Senior Transportation (NCST). Based in Washington, DC, the NCST is administered by Easter Seals in partnership with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration (FTA). The contents of this publication are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the FTA or the NCST. If you would like more information, please call the toll-free line or contact us by email ([ncst@easterseals.com](mailto:ncst@easterseals.com)). Information and resources are available Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (ET) at (866) 528-NCST (voice), or (202) 347-7385 (TDD).

Annie Harmon, a Masters of Gerontology Student at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, authored the guide under the mentorship of Dr. Tom Meuser, director of the UMSL MSG program. The material in "Hanging Up the Keys" is based on a number of resources available in print and on the Internet, as well as the collective experiences and opinions of a group of advisors.

# Sound Familiar?



Ms. Hoffman is an independent 84-year-old, actively involved in the community as a volunteer at a local hospital and grade school. A few months ago, Ms. Hoffman was

diagnosed with early stage Alzheimer’s disease. Since then, her two adult children have been pressuring her to give up driving. She insists that she is still a safe driver, and believes driving is her only transportation option.

Without a car, she worries about being cut off from her activities and friends, as well as unable to shop for groceries and other necessities.

At 74, Mr. Johnson is an avid gardener and community volunteer.



Although he has been slowing down over the last few years, he still enjoys his afternoon drives through town. Today, however, he failed to brake in time, and drove through his garage door. He told his wife that he thought he had been pressing on the brake, but must have hit the gas instead. Mr. Johnson assured his wife that this could have happened to anyone, and told her not to worry, promising he would be more careful in the future.

If either of these situations seems familiar, you are one of the millions of Americans facing the question of when, or if, to stop driving. You or a loved one may have recently received a new diagnosis from the doctor, been in an automobile accident, or had the scare of a “near miss.”

Whatever is going on, use this time to step back, take a deep breath, and make an informed decision. This can be a stressful time for everyone involved. There may be a change in relationships, roles, and responsibilities. It is important to recognize that driving safety is not a black and white issue, but a series of gray areas, as shown on the scale at the bottom of pages 2-3. This guide goes through three steps to help you understand where you or your loved one may fall on this scale:

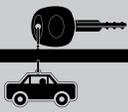
**1. Recognize the risks and resources of the current situation.**

**2. Communicate**

**3. Plan  
(more discussion, adjust or cease driving, or reporting)**



This can be a stressful time for everyone involved.



# Start

# Recognize

## To the Driver:

## To the Family:

Hundreds of thousands of older Americans choose to stop driving every year.

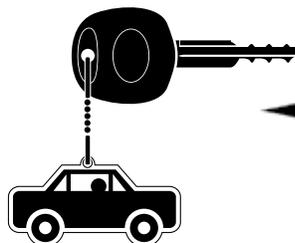
You may be experiencing many feelings and reactions: worry, anger, loss of control. But you do have a voice in this discussion about your driving future. Whether you decide to stop driving or not, this is a good time to really look at your situation. While driving is a privilege that you have enjoyed for many years, there are personal and public safety concerns to consider. Sometimes, changes in our abilities happen so slowly that we are not aware of the current risk. Part of being independent is recognizing when you are no longer able to perform an activity safely. Hundreds of thousands of older Americans choose to stop driving every year. Many others drive only during non-rush hour daylight hours, in familiar areas, and/or during fair weather. Stopping driving is not the end of independence. Many resources are available that will allow you to continue your current activities. Before you make a decision, look at the checklist on the opposite page, and the information on the next page.

At this point in time, you may want to take control of the situation and act immediately. Take a few deep breaths. Calm down and try to take this time to review the overall situation. Include the driver in this process whenever possible. Unless the driver has a guardian, he or she is still an adult with the right to make personal decisions. For good or for ill, this may not be a one-time conversation. Try to take an objective look at how the driver is functioning currently. Consider riding along as your loved one drives to get a better idea of how he or she is doing. Have you observed any of the behaviors from the checklist on the next page?



Reversible or minor impairments

Driving



Adaptations and changes made to support continued safe driving

# Driving Checklist

- Yes    No      1. Other drivers honk at me.
- Yes    No      2. Busy intersections bother me.
- Yes    No      3. I avoid left-hand turns.
- Yes    No      4. Other cars seem to appear out of nowhere and drive too fast.
- Yes    No      5. I have been stopped by the police recently for my driving.
- Yes    No      6. Turning the steering wheel is difficult for me.
- Yes    No      7. I've had more "near misses" lately.
- Yes    No      8. I have trouble seeing street signs in time to respond to them.
- Yes    No      9. I have recently caused a car accident or fender bender.
- Yes    No      10. I get confused or lost in familiar places.
- Yes    No      11. It's hard for me to look over my shoulder when I am backing up or changing lanes.
- Yes    No      12. My friends and family tell me they are worried about my driving, or that they are afraid to ride in the car when I am driving.

**If you checked "Yes" to any of these statements, you may be putting yourself and others at risk every time you drive. This guide can help you figure out your options.**

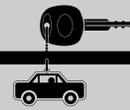
## Continuum

Permanent or major impairments



Discussions and changes made to begin and support stopping driving





# Recognize

## What do I look for?

While certain abilities do decline with age, the rate of decline is different for different people.

Driving is a complex task that requires focus, planning, responding, endurance, and flexibility. A range of conditions can cause physical and cognitive problems that make it more difficult to remain a safe driver. While certain abilities do decline with age, the rate of decline is different for different people. In other words, one 80-year-old driver may not be as capable or limited as the 80-year-old in the next car. However, the likelihood of being diagnosed with one or more conditions that will make it harder to be a safe driver increases as a person ages.

The following categories are a guide to help you take inventory of functional abilities and possible limitations.

**Vision:** After the age of 40, visual acuity decreases. For many older people, a simple visit to an eye doctor to update their eyeglass prescription can make them significantly safer drivers. Others have specific conditions, such as glaucoma, cataracts, or macular degeneration, which limit eyesight. While these may be more challenging to correct, options such as surgery may improve these conditions. If visual problems with acuity and depth perception cannot be corrected, this may be a reason to give up driving.



**Awareness:** Having difficulty processing new information, losing focus on tasks after a few minutes, or getting lost in familiar places are important signs of cognitive decline, *not part of normal aging*. Executive functioning is the ability to process new information and stored knowledge to react to situations and plan the appropriate responses. It is very common for a person to progressively lose the ability to process, plan, and react appropriately early in the disease. More basic activities, such as being physically able to operate a vehicle, are lost long after it is unsafe for a person with dementia to drive. For more information about driving and dementia, please see the next page of this guide.



**Movement:** If a person has trouble moving or feeling their hands, arms, feet, legs, and/or neck, the ability to drive safely is diminished. Conditions that can cause these problems include arthritis, general stiffness, and neuropathy, where hands and feet have decreased sensitivity or numbness, usually caused by poor blood flow in persons with diabetes. Safe drivers must be able to move their heads enough to see the surrounding automobiles and pedestrians, as well as turn the wheel to react in emergency situations. They also need to be able to sense if, or how hard, they are pushing on the pedals.



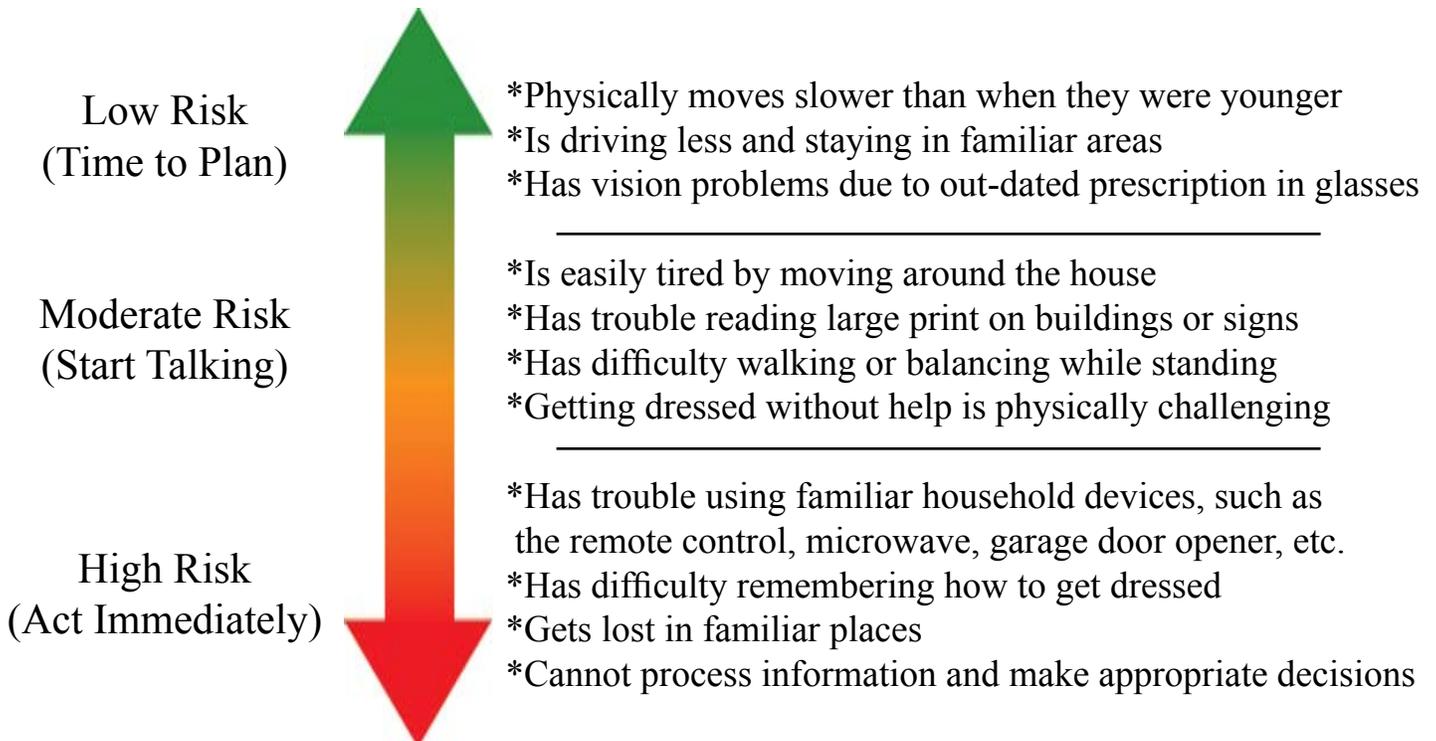
**Other:** Certain medications can cause side effects that can impair a driver's ability to operate an automobile safely, such as drowsiness or reduced reaction time. Sleep disorders such as sleep apnea, or even just a few nights of poor sleep, make a person more likely to be drowsy, or even fall asleep, while they are driving. Asking a physician or pharmacist about common side effects of medications a driver is taking can help you have a more complete view of the overall situation. One can also ask the driver if he or she is aware that medications can affect driving capabilities.



**IMPORTANT:** Certain disorders, such as epilepsy and diabetes, can cause a person to lose consciousness with little or no warning. When an individual of any age experiences a loss of consciousness event, serious consideration must be made to decide if it is safe for that person to drive. When a person loses consciousness, for any reason, the doctor should be notified. State authorities require these occurrences be reported for further testing and possible suspension of driving privileges until the driver is deemed safe.

**The following are warning signs of declining abilities that you can observe during everyday activities.**

THIS IS INTENDED TO BE A GENERAL GUIDE ONLY. INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND RISKS MAY VARY.



## Let's chat...

Speaking openly about your concerns is very important, but beginning this conversation can be difficult.

Many people avoid thinking or talking about giving up driving. Just bringing up the topic can cause strong reactions. In reality, this topic may take many conversations to find a solution. Being prepared before talking will help this process go more smoothly. This includes an awareness of your own

concerns, as well as others' points of view, and objective awareness of the driver's functional status.

You may want to consult with outside resources, like a doctor, lawyer, pharmacist, or religious/spiritual leader who is familiar with the driver, the family, and the situation.

In a crisis, keeping communication open is very important. This is key to reaching a resolution everyone can live with. Speaking openly about your concerns is very important, but beginning this conversation can be difficult. Here are a few conversation starters, adapted from the Hartford guide "We Need to Talk...Family Conversations with Older Drivers".



### **"Driving isn't what it used to be."**

Drivers of every age experience frustration with some part of driving: road conditions, other drivers, traffic, etc. By using this common ground to bring up changes in driving, the conversation is less personal.

### **"I just read that it costs an average of \$20 a day to own a car!"**

Often, people immediately think of the drawbacks when considering giving up driving. But also consider the money that would be available

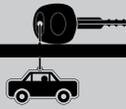
without having to pay for gas, insurance, and maintenance for a car.

### **"How did (friend or relative) stop driving?"**

Chances are that older drivers know friends or relatives who have already gone through driving retirement. Asking about another person's situation can help start your conversation.

### **"I worry about your safety, and the safety of others."**

Talking about the overall public safety may help the driver see the larger picture, rather than just the current situation.



## Driving & Dementia

## What is the Next Step?

When a person is diagnosed with any kind of dementia, it is not a question of *if* they should stop driving, but *when*. As their disease progresses, they lose the ability to react appropriately and plan driving decisions first. The memories of how to mechanically operate a car can remain into later stages, when they are no longer capable of driving safely. If your loved one has dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease, she or he may still be able to participate in a discussion about driving retirement. In the very early stages, some, but not all, dementia patients are able to drive safely. This is a good time to talk about transportation alternatives and future plans. But because dementia is progressive, he or she will continue to lose mental and physical abilities. By the mild to moderate stages, the required ability to process information and react appropriately is gone. Remembering or understanding the reasons they cannot drive may become a problem. Knowing what stage your loved one is currently at can help you decide how to approach the situation. Some physicians write "prescriptions" for patients with dementia that say "Stop driving". Having a respected authority figure write that "order" can help some people understand that driving is now off limits. For a more comprehensive guide to driving and dementia, look at *At the Crossroads: A Guide to Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia & Driving* ([www.thehartford.com/alzheimers](http://www.thehartford.com/alzheimers)).

Depending on how the initial discussion goes, there are many possibilities for what you decide to do next. Remember, there are two paths to consider as you go through this guide:

1. This person is unable to continue safely driving an automobile. This usually requires a post-driving plan to be developed to help the former driver remain mobile, engaged, and fulfilled. The following two pages offer ideas for what to do next.
2. This person is able to continue safely driving an automobile, possibly with a few changes or solutions that may resolve the current medical or functional problems. See "How to Stay Safe" on the following page.

When a person is diagnosed with dementia, it is not a question of *if* they should stop driving, but *when*.



## How to Stay Safe

### Additional Resources

For help locating services available for seniors and caregivers in your area, contact your local Area Agency on Aging. You can find your local office at [www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org), or call the national Eldercare Locator hotline at (800) 677-1116.

For a list of states' transportation web sites, visit [www.dmv-department-of-motor-vehicles.com](http://www.dmv-department-of-motor-vehicles.com)

There are times when simple changes can be made to help an older driver be safer.

- One of the best ways to improve overall health and safety is by regular exercise. Joining classes or just walking more can help maintain or increase strength, flexibility, and endurance.



- If abilities are declining, driving during the day and staying in familiar areas can help extend driving life. Choosing to drive when you feel well-rested and calm can also make a huge difference in your safety.

- All drivers can benefit from reducing distractions, such as cell phones, and emotional conversations, while driving. Always wear a seatbelt, and plan your trip in advance.

- The AARP and other community groups offer older driver refresher courses, to review current rules of the road and give tips to be a more defensive driver.

- The best way to find solutions for your specific situation is to contact a certified driver rehabilitation specialist (CDRS) at [www.drivered.org](http://www.drivered.org). They can assess your skills and needs to make the appropriate recommendations to increase driver safety. Pharmacies and durable equipment suppliers can offer removable handles to make it easier to get in and out of vehicles and mirror extenders to help drivers see more around them. Pillows and cushions can make it easier to see over the steering wheel, and improve the comfort of the seat. Professional installation and adjustment are best when using this equipment.

**For more safe driving ideas, check out the resources at the end of this guide.**

## Rural Options

Those drivers who live outside of urban areas face a unique set of challenges in getting around without driving. They have fewer options, such as using public transportation or walking to nearby stores to get their household necessities. Finding what is available through your Area Agency on Aging is crucial to people in rural communities. Local cab companies may be willing to give you a deal if an individual or group uses their service on a frequent basis. Also, it may be helpful to find others in your community in similar situations, and see if a ride share can be arranged, with family members or friends volunteering different days to drive retired drivers around.

## Alternatives to Driving

Developing a transportation plan for after a loved one has stopped driving can seem overwhelming. The good news is that non-drivers have many options. You can plan your grocery shopping and other shopping needs to join family or friends when they do their errands. When you are at your current activities, ask if anyone in the group can give you a ride. Offering gas money can help offset the cost of extra driving, and the company and conversation can benefit both of you. Depending on the distance to your destination and physical limitations, walking can be a great choice. In areas where it is available, public transportation is convenient and affordable for seniors. An increasing number of communities have paratransit transportation and some larger hospitals offer shuttles to get patients to medical appointments. Places of worship, such as churches and synagogues, often have volunteers to help other members remain active. If you have a short trip, taxicabs may be another form of transportation available to you. Some businesses also have the option of having supplies delivered directly to your home.

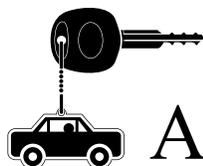
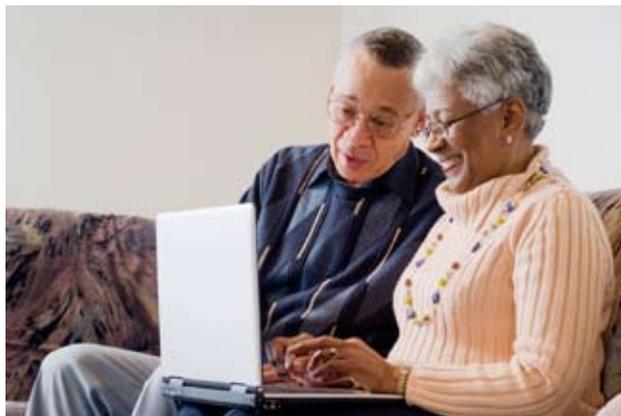
For help identifying and organizing your options, visit [www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers](http://www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers) for a transportation worksheet.

## Reporting Unsafe Drivers



Making the decision to report a loved one to the proper driving authorities is never easy. However, in serious cases, the concern for public safety can outweigh the desires of an individual citizen. Each state has its own laws for reporting unsafe drivers, and the best place to find your state's policies are the department of motor vehicles (or equivalent department) Web site. You may even find more information about making the transition into driving retirement as smooth as possible, or the services available at little or no cost that can help in making an older driver a safer driver. Be aware that you will probably not be able to make this report anonymously. Details are very helpful, so include information about physical or cognitive difficulties that affect driving, especially specific diagnoses.

The good news is that non-drivers have many options.



## Additional Resources

AAA (American Automobile Association)  
[www.aaafoundation.org](http://www.aaafoundation.org)

AAMVA (American Association  
of Motor Vehicle Administrators)  
[www.aamva.org/KnowledgeCenter/Driver](http://www.aamva.org/KnowledgeCenter/Driver)

AARP Driver Safety Program  
[www.aarp.org/drive](http://www.aarp.org/drive)

A Practical Guide to Alzheimer's,  
Dementia & Driving  
(The Hartford Insurance Corp.)  
[www.thehartford.com/alzheimers](http://www.thehartford.com/alzheimers)

American Association of Occupational Therapists  
[www.aota.org/olderdriver](http://www.aota.org/olderdriver)

The Association for Driver  
Rehabilitation Resources  
[www.aded.net](http://www.aded.net)

The Beverly Foundation  
[www.beverlyfoundation.org](http://www.beverlyfoundation.org)

Family Conversations  
with Older Drivers  
(The Hartford Insurance Corp.)  
[www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers](http://www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers)

Grand Driver Program  
(American Association of Motor  
Vehicle Administrators)  
[www.granddriver.info](http://www.granddriver.info)

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety  
[www.iihs.org/research/qanda/older\\_people.html](http://www.iihs.org/research/qanda/older_people.html)

National Center for Injury  
Prevention & Control  
(Older Drivers Page)  
[www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/older.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/older.htm)

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration  
[www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)

Senior Driver Web site  
(AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety)  
[www.seniordrivers.org](http://www.seniordrivers.org)

While the focus of this guide is safe driving and transportation, it may be only one of the complex issues encountered as you or a loved one ages. For more information and support with other aging and caregiver topics, please visit [www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org).

Please visit [www.seniortransportation.net](http://www.seniortransportation.net) to download or order more copies of this guide.