



Resource Guide

FOR
OLDER DRIVERS



“Finding New Gears for Your Later Years”



**Older Driver &
Pedestrian *Safety* Project**

New York State Office for the Aging

As we age, we can continue to drive safely longer with the right supports to ensure driving fitness. According to traffic safety experts from across the country, the key is to intervene early before an on-the-road crisis occurs.

The Older Driver and Pedestrian Safety Project administered by the New York State Office for the Aging, provides information and education to older drivers so that they may remain safely behind the wheel, when appropriate, or access transportation alternatives when they are not. Information and education is also available for caregivers of older drivers, helping professionals in the community, traffic safety professionals or anyone attempting to help an older driver.

Project Partners and Steering Committee

AARP, Albany County Department for the Aging, Albany County Department of Public Works, Allegany County Older Driver Assistance Network, Alzheimer's Association of Northeastern New York, American Automobile Association – Northway and Hudson Valley, Capital District Transportation Authority, Capital District Transportation Committee, Colonie Senior Service Centers, Inc., Erie County Older Driver Family Assistance Help Network, Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, New York State Department of Health, New York State Department of Motor Vehicles, New York State Department of Transportation, New York State Office of the Aging, Mr. Phil Lepore, Consultant on Older Driver Issues, Rensselaer County Department for the Aging, Schenectady County Senior and Long Term Care Services, Senior & Special Needs Driving, LLC, Sunnyview Rehabilitation Hospital and Westchester County Older Driver Family Assistance Program.

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THE EFFECTS OF AGE ON DRIVING – THE CHANGES IN US

The majority of older drivers are good drivers but sometimes a driver's health or physical limitations can affect the safe operation of a motor vehicle. The aging process can affect a driver's ability to sense, decide and act which are all critical skills needed for safe driving.

Knowing the early signs of driving difficulty - both physical and cognitive - allows older drivers and their loved ones to discuss the situation and take appropriate action to maintain their safety and the safety of their community.

Seeing - As we age, we may lose our ability to distinguish details and our field of vision narrows. Declining eyesight affects critical driving functions, such as reading signs and judging the speed of other vehicles.

Medication – Medications have greatly improved the quality of life for many older adults. However the unwanted side effects produced by medications can seriously affect our ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.

Physically - As we age, we may respond more slowly in a crisis, partially because of reduced flexibility, weaker muscles and limited range of motion.

Mentally - As we age, we may process information and react more slowly than younger people. As a result, older drivers may drive more slowly to compensate.

Attention - As we age, we may feel overwhelmed by the level of activity on the road, especially busy highways or congested intersections. We may also have trouble remaining attentive and may become easily distracted.

Perception - As we age, we may have trouble knowing when to yield the right of way, understanding signs and signals, and not being able to accurately judge speed.

VISION and HEARING

Vision

Ninety percent of the information we need to respond to road conditions, traffic patterns, signs and signals comes through our eyes. As we age, a number of conditions may occur that can affect our ability to see well enough to safely operate a motor vehicle.

- Our visual field narrows making it hard to see objects on the edge of our visual field such as signs, signals, vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists.
- The density of our eyes lenses increase making it hard to see in low light conditions.
- We may have increased sensitivity to glare, making it hard to see in the presence of oncoming headlights at night or in the presence of sun glare in the daytime.

There are some simple steps that we can take to help minimize the effect that aging eyes can have on our driving:

- **Get Regular Eye Exams** (at least every two years). Cataracts are common among older drivers and can be corrected with surgery. The progress of many other eye problems including glaucoma and macular degeneration can be slowed if they are detected and treated early.
- **Update Eye Glass Prescriptions Regularly** and always wear your glasses when driving.
- **Limit Driving to Daytime Hours** if you have a problem with the glare from on-coming headlights. Compensate by wearing sun glasses if glare from the sun affects your ability to see.

Hearing

Hearing loss is especially dangerous when driving. As we age, we often lose the ability to hear high pitched tones such as sirens, and sounds among background noise, such as horns and railroad warnings. If hearing loss is ignored or untreated, it can get worse. But hearing loss that is identified early can be helped through treatment such as hearing aids, certain medications and surgery.

- **Always Wear Your Hearing Device When Driving.**

MEDICATIONS and DRIVING

Most drivers are unaware of the potentially dangerous impact medications can have on their driving performance. Taking prescription or over-the-counter medications can cause impairments, such as drowsiness, dizziness, sleepiness, and blurred vision. Reaction time on the road may be clouded by medications that slow the brain's ability to process important driving cues.

If you are planning to drive while taking medication be sure to:

Talk to Your Doctor - When your doctor prescribes a medication, ask about the potential side effects the medication may produce. Ask your doctor if any of your medications, or combination of them, should limit or stop you from driving because of the side effects.

Talk to Your Pharmacist - At the pharmacy, request printed information describing the side effects of all medications you are taking. If you purchase your medications by mail, mail-order pharmacies have toll-free numbers you can call for questions about your medications.

Observe Your Reactions - Take note of how your body feels and reacts to various drugs or supplements you may be taking. Keep track of how you feel after taking the medication, noting the time you took it, and be aware of any symptoms you may be feeling. If you feel dizzy, drowsy, or experience blurred vision, let your doctor and pharmacist know. These symptoms can affect your ability to drive safely.

Create a Personal Medication Record - The best way to track your medications and help your doctor and pharmacist have the most updated information is to create a Personal Medication Record. Bring your updated Personal Medication Record to all of your appointments, and provide copies to your doctor and to your pharmacist. It is especially important to follow this suggestion if you have more than one doctor prescribing medications or if you are using multiple pharmacies to have your prescriptions filled.

STAYING PHYSICALLY FIT for DRIVING

As we age, we all want to be able to handle the demands of safe driving. To remain safe on the road we must remain alert and quick to respond in emergency situations. We also need to keep up to date with health habits to keep our minds and bodies in shape and able to handle the demands of safe driving.

Studies have shown that more than half of the disabilities caused by chronic disease are closely related to personal health habits and behavior. Individual life styles have a direct relationship to longevity and the quality of life. It all begins with your attitude about how much control you believe you have over the quality of your life.

For most of us, our car is the second most complex machine that we operate, the first is our body. As we age, we must deal with weaker muscles, reduced flexibility and a more limited range of motion. All of which may affect our ability to grip and turn a steering wheel, press the accelerator or brake, or even reach to open the doors and windows. Strength, flexibility and overall wellness contribute to the ability of an older driver to remain a safe driver.

Exercise reduces the extent of slowing down and extended exercise may eliminate it completely. Physical fitness is essential to safe driving, especially as we age. Studies have confirmed that higher levels of fitness among older drivers correspond to better driving ability. Exercise is a great tune-up of our hearts muscles and joints. Check you your doctor to determine the right exercise for you.

An effective exercise program should do three things:

- Challenge the heart and lungs aerobically.
- Stretch and strengthen the muscles.
- Loosen the joints and make them flexible.

As we age, drivers should:

- Talk to the doctor about recommended exercises designed to maintain the flexibility and strength needed for safe driving.
- Take-up activities like gardening, swimming, walking in the shopping mall or other activities which can help keep you in good physical shape.
- Do stretching and balance exercises as recommend by the doctor.

STAYING MENTALLY FIT for DRIVING

Once our eyes and ears take in information, it is up to our mind to process it and decide on the best course of action. While older minds may be just as sharp as younger ones; they often react more slowly. As we age, it takes longer for the brain to process information and harder for us to ignore distractions.

Memory

- We are more easily distracted. It often becomes more difficult to pay attention to incoming information and to store it appropriately.
- Our ability to retrieve memories slows down. When driving, this affects both the ability to quickly interpret the distance to oncoming traffic and response time.

Attention-Switching

- Drivers must quickly transfer attention from one traffic situation to another. Attention switching requires rapidly processing a number of events while paying attention to steering a course. As we age, vision, hearing or cognitive impairments can influence attention switching.

Divided Attention (“Multitasking”)

- As we age, we can experience more difficulty in dividing our attention among multiple tasks and in switching rapidly from one task to another. Difficulty in switching rapidly from one task to another makes using cellular phones or navigation systems, tuning the radio or even listening to conversations among passengers disruptive to driving concentration.

Completion of Missing Information

- Drivers continually fill in missing information from cues around them. With cognitive slowing, the ability to fill in missing information correctly diminishes, putting the driver at risk by forcing a dangerously slow speed on the road and causing confusion and disorientation at traffic detours or significant turns.

The good news is that experience, mature judgment and good driving habits can many times compensate for diminished skills as we age. Stay mentally active and by using problem solving skills in non driving ways can help mental flexibility. Activities like jig saw puzzles, crosswords or learning a new skill or hobby is fun at any age and helps keep the mind flexible.

DRIVING SAFELY LONGER

While the natural process of aging may ultimately affect the skills required to be a safe driver, the changes usually happen over time. Over the course of 10, 20 or more years, older adults may modify their driving several times to accommodate the natural changes in our bodies that aging brings on. As changes in vision, hearing, or other health conditions impair driving skills, older drivers need to know how to adjust their habits to maintain safe mobility and community connections. Just a few simple adjustments such as limiting your driving to certain times can help protect you and those around you from deadly crashes.

It is important to remember that a driver's chronological age is not a good predictor of driving ability.

What counts on the road is your ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.

The Fundamentals for “Drivers of all Ages:”

- Always wear your glasses as required and get your vision checked regularly.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist how your medications may affect driving.
- Stay in shape. Healthy eating, regular exercise and adequate sleep can help you stay alert and may improve your reaction time.
- Be rested. Get plenty of sleep. Do not drive when you are physically exhausted or sleep-deprived.
- Never drink alcohol and drive.
- Always wear your safety belts properly – even for quick trips.
- Turn on your headlights when driving – even in the daytime.
- Drive the posted speed limit.
- Drive defensively and move out of an aggressive or distracted driver's way.
- Allow a greater distance between you and the vehicle in front of you so that you will have plenty of time to stop.
- Avoid left hand turns if you are uncomfortable making them. If you must make a left hand turn make sure you have enough time and space to safely cross the oncoming traffic lane before turning. Always watch for pedestrians who might force you to stop before you can safely complete your turn.
- Use your turn signals and stay in the appropriate lane.
- Keep headlights, mirrors and the windshield of your car clean.

- Keep your mirrors adjusted so that your “second set of eyes” can work for you.
- Always look at the road ahead so that you can see trouble before you reach it.
- Eliminate distractions such as the radio or cell phone. If people in the car are distracting you, tell them that they will have a safer ride if they are quiet.
- Plan ahead. Know your driving route and take familiar roads. Avoid busy intersections and use them at less congested times.
- Take a break after every 90 minutes of driving. Get out of the vehicle and stretch to help relieve stiffness and fatigue.
- Take a driver safety course. If you do, you may qualify for a discount on your auto insurance.

Get Plenty of Sleep

- Get plenty of sleep the night before a trip.
- Do not drive late at night when your body is used to being in bed.
- Avoid driving in the middle of the afternoon.
- Do not drive after being awake for more than fifteen hours.

If You Begin to Feel Drowsy While Driving:

- Stop driving.
- Pull over and take a nap (even 15 or 20 minutes can restore your alertness).
- Get out of the car and take a stretch.
- Keep in mind that caffeine will produce only a short term boost in energy.

Adjust Your Driving Habits to Avoid Difficult Traffic Situations.

- Drive during daylight.
- Drive in good weather. Rain, snow, hail and fog can limit how well you can see.
- Avoid rush-hour traffic which usually occurs between 7:00am and 9:00am in the morning and between 4:00 and 6:00pm in the afternoon.
- Limit fast-paced highway driving.

Don't Get Caught in the Dark

Even on familiar roads, as daylight falls, drivers should use extra caution and watch for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists who will be less visible. If you have trouble seeing at night, have your vision checked and plan ahead to avoid driving in dark conditions.

Find a Safe Way

Consider driving with a friend, or map out and practice the safest ways to routine destinations: grocery stores, churches, doctor's offices, shopping centers, etc.

Always Look For:

- Well-lit streets.
- Left turns at controlled intersections with left-turn arrows.
- Clear signs and well-marked lanes.
- Easy parking.

Drive a Safe Car

Look beyond the conventional safety features on a car. Like all drivers, older drivers should make sure their cars offer a comfortable fit, maximum visibility, and minimal physical strain.

Consider These Safety Features for Your Next Car:

- Height-adjustable seats.
- Tilt/telescoping steering wheel.
- Height-adjustable safety-belt anchors.
- Good visibility.
- Big, glare-proof mirrors.
- Power steering, windows and door locks.
- Equipment such as pedal extenders and hand controls (for drivers with special needs).

Consult an adaptable equipment professional who can help equip your car with devices that help compensate for any losses of flexibility and strength.

DRIVER SAFETY RESOURCES

Driving a car is a life-long learning process. Technology changes, environmental changes and societal changes demand that drivers be adaptable. Defensive driving programs offer the older driver an opportunity to refresh their skills and driving abilities. Defensive driving programs refresh knowledge concerning the rules of the road as well as provide safety tips. Included here, for your information, are the names of the most frequently requested programs. There may be others offered in your community.

AARP Driver Safety Program

The AARP Driver Safety Program is the nation's first and largest refresher course for drivers age 50 and older. This program has helped millions of drivers remain safe on today's roads. You can expect to learn about current rules of the road, how to operate your vehicle more safely in today's increasingly challenging driving environment, and how to make adjustments to compensate for common age-related changes in vision, hearing, medications and reaction time.

The program is designed to help you:

- Tune up your driving skills and update your knowledge of the rules of the road to help you drive more safely.
- Learn about normal age-related physical changes, and how to adjust your driving to allow for those changes.
- Reduce your traffic violations, crashes, and chances for injuries.
- Get an insurance discount. Auto insurance companies in most states provide a multiyear discount to AARP participants.

To find out about an AARP driver safety session in your area call 1-888-227-7669 or on the web at www.aarp.org/drive Cost for the course varies.

Your Local American Automobile Association (AAA) Offers:

- Safety Brochures on all aspects of driving.
- Self assessment tools such as “Roadwise Review,” “DriveSharp Calculator” and “Drivers 55 Plus” are free on-line at www.seniordrivers.org
- The AAA Defensive Driving Course. Cost for the course varies.

National Safety Council - Defensive Driving Course

Features of the course include:

- 10% off the basic rate of the liability portion of auto insurance.
- 10% off the basic rate of the collision portion of auto insurance.
- The insurance discount remains in effect for three years.
- Reduction of up to 4 points on your driving record.

For a class schedule call 1-800-427-2365 or visit www.safetycouncil.com
Cost for the course varies.

Approved Driver Safety Course Providers

Current listings of driver safety course providers in New York State can also be found on the New York State Department of Motor vehicles website at:
www.nysdmv.com/pirp.htm

Driver Assessment/Rehabilitation Programs

Driver assessment/rehabilitation programs specialize in the evaluation of health based skills needed for safe driving based on a doctor's order. Although driver rehabilitation programs may vary, most typically include a clinical assessment including a review of driving history, medical review of functional abilities and medication use, as well as a behind-the-wheel assessment of driving skills and safety. Individuals who have physical, visual, mental and/or cognitive conditions would benefit from a driver evaluation.

Contact your local area agency on aging to locate the most frequently requested driver safety programs offered in your community.

- The area agency on aging is listed in the government pages of your local telephone directory.
- You can also call 2-1-1 or call the New York State Office for the Aging's Senior Citizen's Help Line toll free at 1-800-342-9871 to get the number for your local area agency on aging.

PLANNING for RETIREMENT from DRIVING

Most people want to keep driving as long as possible. No one wants to give up the freedom and convenience of driving. While experts agree that driving ability generally begins to deteriorate at age 55, all drivers are not the same. Some people can continue driving well into old age; others cannot. The decision to stop driving is a tough one but most of us want to make a responsible choice to protect ourselves and others.

In The Past Few Months Have You:

- Noticed that your eyesight is not as good as it used to be?
- Experienced difficulty in making sharp turns or negotiating intersections?
- Hesitated over right-of-way decisions or driving situations you once took for granted?
- Been surprised by the sudden presence of other vehicles, bicyclists, pedestrians or road hazards?
- Received negative feedback from others about close calls, near misses or unsafe driving?
- Become lost on familiar routes?
- Felt nervous or exhausted after driving?
- Been cited for traffic violations or have been involved in a fender bender?

The time may come when an older driver decides to retire from driving.

But retiring from driving doesn't mean retiring from life.

Plan ahead and learn about the alternative options for getting around.

TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES

To learn about the transportation alternatives in your community begin by calling the area agency on aging in the county where you reside.

- The area agency on aging listed in the government pages of your local telephone directory.
- You can also call 2-1-1 or call the New York State Office for the Aging's Senior Citizen's Help Line toll free at 1-800-342-9871 to get the number for your local area agency on aging.

This is what an area agency on aging can do to help you:

- Provide information about virtually all of the programs and services available to older adults and their families in the community.
- The area agency on aging will have a directory listing all of the services for older persons and caregivers in their area including transportation.
- The area agency on aging will have a staff member who can help you with your transportation questions. If not, they will refer you to someone in the community who can help.

Please be aware that when you contact the area agency on aging to find out about transportation providers in the community you will need be prepared to tell them if you are able to use a taxi, public transportation or a senior van independently or if you will require assistance.

In the process of making arrangements for alternative transportation, these are some questions to ask when you contact a local transportation provider:

- What is the service area of the transportation provider?
- What is the eligibility criterion to use the service?
- How much does it cost?
- Are reduced fares offered? If so, how does one receive a reduced fare?
- What are the hours and days of service?
- How much assistance does the driver provide?
- Does the driver help with packages?

Be sure to write it all down.

Based on the information you gathered, prepare a list of transportation alternatives and keep it near the telephone or somewhere that is handy to access.

Be sure to keep the transportation plan current; things change.

- Over time, changes in your abilities or interests can mean that adjustments need to be made to your transportation plan.
- Remember that communities are developing new transportation resources all the time as well as refining existing ones.
- Some of these new resources may better meet your needs than those that are listed in your current plan.
- Therefore, it is important to review the transportation plan at least twice a year to ensure that it still works.
- The key is to keep in touch with the local area agency on aging to find out if new and better choices are available to better serve you.

For Additional Information:

New York State Office for the Aging
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Help Line
1-800-342-9871

E-Mail
nysosa@ofa.state.ny.us

Web Site
<http://www.aging.ny.gov/>

