

American Care Manager Monthly Newsletter

"The Newsletter that Keeps Geriatric Professionals Up-To-Date on Important Healthcare Topics"

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Senior Living: "Watch out, Seniors Driving!"

If you have ever visited Central Florida or even Ocean County New Jersey where hundreds of senior living communities have sprouted, you probably had an experience with one of the many seniors still driving on the roads. Some of these experiences might include; wondering who is driving the car since you don't see a person's head over the steering wheel, trying to figure out which lane they are driving in since it seems as though they are claiming both lanes, clocking their vehicle at going 20 miles in a 50 mph zone, or even the all too common abrupt stop in the middle of the road. Many of our readers have sent emails regarding information on when a senior person should finally let go of that final independence, their car.

Seniors typically like to hold on to their cars as long as possible in order to maintain the last shred of independence. Though for the 50-70 years they have been driving many of these seniors only received the test they originally took from the DMV when they were 16, 17, or 18 years old. The roads, expectations, number of drivers, and cars have changed significantly since then. Once they have their license they never need to take a written or road test again. Many often refuse to stop driving until they are in an accident or worse, cause a serious accident. Unfortunately, seniors suffer from more ailments than any other segment of the population. These ailments can significantly impede their ability to drive responsibly. Many of the issues that cause their driving problems can be traced to Alzheimer's, vision, reflexes, motor skills, muscle complications, medications they are taking, etc. Any of these complications can lead to a scary situation on the road.

Some of the signs loved ones can look for in deciding if it is time to talk with the senior person about giving up their car or limiting the amount they drive are:

1. Feeling uncomfortable and nervous or fearful while driving
2. Dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs etc.
3. Difficulty staying in the lane of travel
4. Getting lost
5. Trouble paying attention to signals, road signs and pavement markings
6. Slower response to unexpected situations
7. Medical conditions or medications that may be affecting the ability to handle the car safely
8. Frequent "close calls" (i.e. almost crashing)
9. Trouble judging gaps in traffics at intersections and on highway entrance/exit ramps
10. Other drivers honking at you and an increase in the amount of instances when you are angry at other drivers
11. Friends or relatives not wanting to drive with you
12. Difficulty seeing the sides of the road when looking straight ahead
13. Easily distracted or having a hard time concentrating while driving
14. Having a hard time turning around to check over your shoulder while backing up or changing lanes
15. Frequent traffic tickets or "warnings" by traffic or law enforcement officers in the last year or two

If a senior person is experiencing more than one of these problems then perhaps you should start to work with them towards reducing the amount of time they drive until ultimately, they no longer need to depend on their car for their daily needs. You may also want to sign them up for a driver refresher class that many DMV's, private companies, and the AARP make available for senior people.

However, before you have a conversation with a senior person about giving up or restricting their right to drive you should develop a plan. This plan provide them with the type of transportation they need to order to still feel independent including such activities as; grocery shopping, cleaners, visiting friends and grandchildren, bowling, meeting friends for lunch, golfing, salon, etc.. Once you have a plan that will enable the senior person to maintain their lifestyle without driving you can start to approach them cautiously and with compassion. Discussions with senior to limit or to stop their driving should be presented on a phased approach meaning on a "little by little cut-back" basis rather than all at once approach. Seniors have to be shown that they that they can continue with their normal daily activities through the plan of action you set up. You should also understand that, in general, this will not be an easy discussion or transition for the senior person to accept – so prepare yourself for some difficult conversations.

Nevertheless, a potential plan of action can include; driver refresher courses, an agreement to limit the hours they drive and the time of day, drive to familiar areas only, encourage them to begin using other modes of travel such as public transportation or with friends and family, contact the local motor vehicles department to find out what classes they offer, and contact the local senior center to find out what options are available for seniors that are not able to drive anymore in the area. Working with a senior person to help them drive safer or to finally understand that they should put their car keys down is a great way to ensure they do not seriously hurt themselves or anyone else.

Persuading a senior person to understand that there is a problem with their driving can be a difficult and time consuming endeavor to undertake, though many times it is necessary. Success will usually come only if you put together a solid and convincing plan of action and present it in a very caring manner. Your patience will be a virtue during this potentially difficult time. Always remember, driving to a senior person not only represents their independence but more importantly their "freedom." Seniors need to be supported in all aspects of their lives, driving is one area where they not only affect themselves but everyone that is on the road around them.