

# Safe Driving for Seniors



As our loved ones age, there are normal changes their bodies will go through. But this doesn't mean that they must give up the things they enjoy or that continue to give them a sense of freedom – like driving. They can compensate for many of these progressive changes just by being aware and being proactive.

## Vision

Eyesight is the most critical of the normal results of aging because nearly all sensory input you need to drive a car comes from visual cues. Common vision changes as we age include sharpness, varying focus and increased glare. Your loved ones peripheral and distance vision will decrease as they age making their line of sight and field of view more narrow and closer range. By age 60 we need three times more light to see “normally”, thus making night driving more challenging as well.

### Strategies:

- Look at the side of objects
- Protect your eyes from glare
- Avoid headlights of oncoming traffic by looking at the white line on the right side of the road
- Adjust your review mirror to “night” setting

## Hearing

One third of Americans over age 65 have age-related hearing loss. This creates a danger with the inability to hear sirens, horns, and railroad warnings. The best strategy for this is to identify hearing loss early and seek treatment through hearing aides, medications or surgery. Consult your loved ones healthcare provider for assessment.

## Reaction Time

Reaction time includes the ability to process information in the driving environment, choose an action based on that information and react based on that decision. These three steps require your loved one to have a sharp mind and a flexible body.

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## Fit to Drive

Driving uses many of your loved ones body systems: Flexibility, Balance, Endurance and Strength. Encouraging wellness and/or rehabilitative therapy programs to your loved ones is very important in “keeping the keys”. Stretching, balance and coordination exercises, endurance and strengthening exercises all work to improve your loved ones driving performance and safety. Keeping the cognitive ability to remember locations and directions, recognizing traffic signs, responding to construction zones are all critical in staying safe while driving as well. And lastly, but just as important, reviewing your loved ones medication lists and side effects will set them up for success to continue driving.

## Giving Up the Keys

Having these conversations with your aging parent or loved one is sensitive and uncomfortable. But sooner or later, you will need to have the talk about giving up their car keys. Here are some helpful tips on easing this conversation and making it more successful for you both.

## Don't Wait to Have the Conversation

The key is to speak to your loved one before an accident occurs. Look for the warning signs reviewed above. Look for dents or scratches in their vehicle. Be prepared to have more than one conversation about this and give your loved one time to “warm up” to the idea of giving you their keys.

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## **Choose the Right Person to Speak to Your Loved One**

This is a sensitive conversation so choose one or two people that your parent or loved one responds to best. Make sure the whole family is on the same page before the conversation – this will help ensure a wide range of support for your loved one. Come from a supportive, understanding and respectful place. Remember that losing the ability to drive often means losing who you can see, who you depend on and what activities you can pursue. Provide your loved one alternatives that allow for independence even in the absence of driving.

We know the health and safety of your aging loved one is your top priority. Try these strategies to allow for continued driving as long as safely possible, then offer support and alternatives when giving up the keys. Also know there are additional resources and communities like ours that are here to listen and help.