



# A Turn for the Better

## Helping an Older Driver Stay Safe on the Road

At first, the signs are tempting to ignore: *It really was just a “little” fender bender. Everyone misses merging cars from time to time.* Then, suddenly you realize you’ve been kidding yourself. It’s time—maybe past time—to have a caring conversation about road safety with someone you love, an older driver.

In the past, these conversations often started (and ended) with the suggestion to limit or stop driving. But not anymore. Today, brain training can help many older drivers stay behind the wheel—safely.



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Aging does usher in some unwelcome changes, and many of those changes can affect driving abilities. But older people today are holding onto their car keys longer and driving more miles than in the past.<sup>1</sup> Today, maintaining mobility is highly valued and, for some people, it's the only way to get around. Not only does driving help people stay active, independent, and socially connected, but it also reduces the risk of depression.<sup>2</sup> It appears that the meaningful connections driving affords us, such as being able to visit friends or attend events, may provide a pretty strong buffer against mortality.<sup>3</sup>

With a projected 70 million over age 65 by 2030<sup>4</sup>—and with so much at stake—addressing safe mobility for the aging is certainly no small matter. Sooner or later, it affects almost everyone. If you're concerned about an older driver in your life, you may be relieved to know that older drivers can take more steps than ever before to stay alert, aware, and able to handle the demands of safe driving. One notable way? With a new software program that actually improves the brain's ability to drive sharper called DriveSharp™ (see page 8 for more information).

Here's what you need to know about how aging changes driving abilities and what you can do to help an older driver stay safe on the road.

## How Aging Changes the Ability to Drive

Declining vision and hearing, poorer health, problems with memory, decreased strength and agility—all are common in older people. A reduced tolerance for alcohol and increased use of medications can also greatly impact driving.<sup>5</sup> Throw into the mix slower reaction times and greater distractibility, and you've got a setup for potential accidents.

Drivers under 20 still pose the greatest risk to other drivers and pedestrians.<sup>6</sup> But, after age 75, drivers put themselves and their passengers at greatest risk: they have higher fatality rates, mainly because their frailer bodies can't withstand physical trauma as well as those of younger people.<sup>7</sup> Drivers 70 and older are also involved in more crashes for every mile they drive. This trend, however, is slowing,<sup>6</sup> possibly due to safer vehicles, fitter drivers, or the choices many make to limit driving.

To better understand how risks can accelerate for the older driver, take a look at the three main steps involved in driving: sensing information in one's surroundings, deciding what to do with it, and acting.

**1. Sensing Surroundings.** A driver's sense of hearing and vision are clearly critical. Unfortunately, nearly a third of people age 65 and older suffer severe hearing loss, making it tough to hear sirens, horns, or railroad warnings.<sup>6</sup> Vision changes are common, too.

After age 40, people's eyesight starts to decline. Over time, they begin to lose the ability to:





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“I used to drive with my eyes solely focused on the road and only used my rear view mirror to check my surroundings. The driving program has encouraged me to use my side view mirrors and peripheral vision more often. I am more alert after doing DriveSharp.”

Patricia R., age 73

With slower reaction times and greater distractibility, an aging driver may find this poses a big problem. Luckily, many older driv-

- Distinguish details—both at rest and in motion.
- Change focus quickly between near and far objects. (This takes about 30 percent longer for drivers over 40.)<sup>6</sup>
- Detect certain colors, such as flashing red brake lights.
- See well in the dark. (To drive, a 60-year-old requires ten times as much light as a 19-year-old.)<sup>3</sup>
- Adjust to changing light conditions. (A 55-year-old takes eight times longer to recover from glare than a 16-year-old.)<sup>6</sup>
- See objects with side vision.
- Assess distance (depth perception), affecting judgment about the speed of oncoming cars.
- Take in information quickly and manage many visual activities at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

**2. Driving Decisively.** A driver is bombarded with information through the senses—information that requires constant decision-making: A typical driver makes 20 decisions per mile, requiring split-second responses to stay safe on the road.<sup>6</sup>

ers compensate for these weaknesses with experience, mature judgment, and solid driving habits. And that explains why many choose to avoid situations—dark roads, rush hour, harsh weather—where their declining driving skills put themselves and others at greater risk. Some people, however, refuse to admit that anything’s changed, even when they find themselves increasingly flummoxed by the challenges of the road. Sound like anyone you know?

**3. Acting with Agility.** The third step of driving requires action. But for an aging driver, carrying out decisions may be easier said than done. Arthritic hands, weaker muscles, or a limited range of motion can challenge even the most vital of older drivers. These effects, common with aging, make it harder to grip a steering wheel, turn to check for other cars, or press the brake.

Although brain training can’t improve poor physical agility, fortunately it can go a long way toward helping the brain process more visual information, more quickly—a critical ability for safe driving.

### What’s Useful about Useful Field of View (UFOV)?

Useful Field of View (UFOV) is the area over which the brain can quickly and accurately see details when looking straight ahead and not moving the eyes or head. UFOV tends to shrink with age, which means you see less with your side, or peripheral, vision.<sup>8</sup>

This can spell trouble for the aging driver. Hampered by invisible “blinders,” you might not notice a dog darting into the road or a car merging into your lane. In fact, drivers with poor visual processing are up to twice as likely to get into an automobile crash<sup>9</sup>—which might explain, in part, why older drivers are involved more often in crashes involving merges, angles, and intersections.<sup>10</sup>

Poor visual processing alone can drive the decision to hang up the car keys for good. Measured by UFOV, slower cognitive speed of processing is a major predictor of lessened mobility—even greater than vision, health, and physical performance.<sup>11</sup> The good news is you can increase your UFOV by training your brain to process more of what your eyes take in with a special brain training software program. See page 8 for more information.

“After using the program, I use my peripheral vision more effectively. When driving, I can definitely focus on multiple objects more easily. That makes me feel more confident.”

**Terry C., age 75**

### **Drivers 55 Plus:**

#### **Test Your Own Performance**

Available at local AAA clubs or at the website of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety: [www.aaafoundation.org](http://www.aaafoundation.org)

#### **Roadwise Review**

Available on CD, Roadwise Review is a computer-based self-assessment tool. To learn how to obtain a copy, go to: [www.aaapublicaffairs.com](http://www.aaapublicaffairs.com)

#### **Posit Science’s Crash Risk Evaluation**

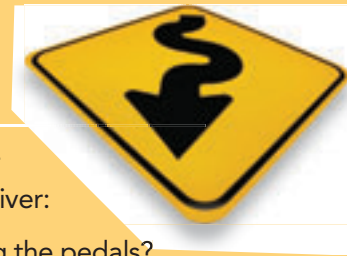
An online assessment available at [www.drivesharpnow.com](http://www.drivesharpnow.com)

Another place to start is by asking for the opinion of others who know your loved one well. Or, go out for a spin together and observe. Think about the steps required for safe driving—sensing, deciding, and acting—and see if you spot signs of risky driving in your loved one.

## Taking Stock of an Older Driver’s Skills

Ideally, every driver would periodically assess his or her own driving performance. Taking a self-assessment may be the ideal way for an aging driver to see whether skills have deteriorated or to plan for future shortcomings. You can help by encouraging your loved one to take a self-assessment. Here are a few options:

## Signs of Risky Driving



Ask the following questions. If you answer “yes,” put a check in the box. Does the driver:

- Ride the brake or have trouble working the pedals?
- Drive at inappropriate speeds?
- Park poorly?
- Become easily distracted?
- Have difficulty merging on freeways or turning onto busy streets?
- Have trouble seeing other vehicles, cyclists, or pedestrians, especially at night?
- Seem to ignore or “miss” stop signs and other traffic signals?
- React too slowly to sirens and flashing lights?
- React too slowly to the unexpected, such as another car merging ahead?
- Weave, straddle lanes, drift into other lanes, or change lanes without signaling?
- Experience lots of honking from other drivers or get frequently passed?
- Get lost or disoriented, even in familiar places?
- Get lots of traffic tickets, or has the driver become involved in two or more crashes or “near-misses” in the past two years?

Even one check is a “wake-up call.” But the greater the number of boxes you’ve checked, the greater the cause for concern. It’s definitely time for a caring conversation and to consider whether a brain fitness program might make a difference.