

From the Parish Nurse

Senior Driving: Risk Factors, Safety Tips

(Second of a three-part series)

Safe driving requires that you make important decisions very quickly when you are behind the wheel. Your driving skills rely on the ability to:

- See and hear clearly
- Synthesize different types of information right away
- Act quickly and decisively

Physical changes that happen with aging slow down the decision-making process and affect the ability to drive safely. By age 40, for example, people with 20/20 daytime vision will have weaker nighttime sight. By age 60, we need three times the amount of light we did at 20 in order to drive safely after nightfall.

In addition to good vision, health factors that affect safe driving include:

- Hearing
- Flexibility and range of motion
- Reflexes
- Reaction time
- Cognitive and motor ability.

Additionally, numerous environmental factors affect your ability to drive safely, including:

- Signs and road markings that are difficult to see or to read
- Complex and confusing intersections
- Older vehicles that lack automatic safety features

- Newer dashboard instrument panels with multiple displays.

All of this is not to say that old age takes away your ability to drive. Senior drivers who adapt their driving practices can prolong the ability to drive safely.

What are some tips to help seniors drive safely?

- **Drive a car that meets your needs.** Choose a vehicle with automatic transmission, power steering and power brakes. See an occupational therapist for special driving aids.
- **Keep your car in peak operating condition.** Visit your mechanic prior to taking a long trip.
- **Drive during daylight hours,** and plan your route before you leave the house. Don't drive during bad weather (snow and ice, thunderstorms).
- **Focus on the road.** Carry a cell phone for emergencies, but don't use it while driving. The same goes for the radio or CD player, eating, and other distractions.
- **Don't follow too closely.** For every 10 miles per hour of speed, follow one car length behind the car in front of you. For example, if you are going 40 miles per hour, stay at least 4 car lengths behind the car in front of you.
- **Enroll in a Driver Safety course for people over 50.** A refresher

course will remind you of safe driving practices and teach you about new traffic control and roadway design features.

- **See your health care provider regularly.** Have your vision, hearing and general health checked. Be sure to mention any medications you are taking (even over-the-counter ones) and their possible effects on your driving.
- **Maintain physical and mental fitness!** With doctor's approval, stretching exercises, a walking program, or a yoga class might help you stay fit.

Information is from HELPGUIDE.org

What are the warning signs of unsafe driving?

If you are finding it harder to drive than you once did, pay attention for signs that your driving might be unsafe. The following is a list of red flags:

- Feeling more nervous or fearful while driving or feeling exhausted after driving
- Difficulty staying in the lane of travel

- More frequent "close calls" (i.e. almost crashing), or dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs, etc.
- Other drivers honking at you more often; more instances when you are angry at other drivers
- Friends or relatives not wanting to drive with you
- Trouble moving foot from gas to brake pedal or confusing the two pedals
- Getting lost more often
- Trouble paying attention to signals, road signs and pavement markings
- More traffic tickets or "warnings" by traffic or law enforcement officers in the last year or two

Finally, where are your skills today? Make a plan now for the future. Set some benchmarks for when you will make the decision yourself to stop driving. Discuss this issue with your family and friends rather than having your family or friends confront you with this important life decision.

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*Champs is funded by a grant from
the Alegent Health Community Benefit Trust*