

Senior Driving and Health – Resource for Physicians and Patients

The majority of the adult U.S. population drives a car or some other vehicle. Many drive on a daily basis. The task of driving is a complex task. For example, in addition to a host of other skills, we are required to respond to visual feedback of both threats in front of us and threats in our peripheral visual fields, we must judge speed and adapt speed to varying situations, we have to judge the spacing of objects and other vehicles, and we have to process a great deal of information to overtake another vehicle or to merge into traffic. Accomplishing these tasks requires good vision, alert mental function, quick reaction time, stamina, as well as other cognitive and physical health factors.

As a natural consequence of the aging process, the visual, mental and physical skills it takes to safely operate a vehicle may decline in function. It is important to note that there is a great deal of variation in decline (if any) of these functions among individuals of the same age.

When should you be concerned and ask your doctor or other care provider about your medical fitness to drive?

Vision:

You have problems reading highway and street signs
You have problems seeing lane and pavement markings
You are experiencing **more discomfort** with glare from oncoming headlights

Physical Fitness:

You are experiencing declines in strength, flexibility and coordination.

- It is hard to look over your shoulder to change lanes and to check left and right.
- You experience difficulty moving your foot between the accelerator and the brake.
- You've fallen to the ground – not counting stumbles and trips – in the past year.
- You are having problems with your balance.

Cognition, Attention & Reflexes:

You are increasingly **overwhelmed** by all of the signs, signals, & road markings.
Judging traffic gaps is harder, making left turns and merging is more difficult.
You are slower in seeing other cars and realizing they have slowed or stopped.

Driving:

You caused a crash, or had near misses, particularly for the reasons noted here
You have gotten lost driving or get confused traveling familiar routes.
You have lost confidence in you ability to drive safely.

Medications & Procedures:

You are concerned that medications you are taking make you dizzy, drowsy, or affect your ability to concentrate.
You are concerned about the affects of a newly prescribed medication on your driving.
You have been diagnosed with a new condition and you are not sure how it may affect your ability to drive safely.
You have new symptoms and you are not sure if they impact on your ability to drive (i.e., weakness, pain, tremors, dizziness, visual problems, etc.)
You are having a medical procedure and you are not sure how it will affect your ability to drive safely (i.e., hip, knee, shoulder or other surgery.)

If any of the above mentioned items (or others) raise concern about your fitness to drive, you should specifically discuss them with your physician or other care provider. They can assess you, or have you referred to another specialist, including a driving occupational therapist.