

Senior Driving:

TIPS FOR SAFE DRIVING AND TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES



Drivers have to make about 15 major decisions for each kilometer driven, each requiring almost immediate action. Experience and mature judgment are important, but older drivers often process information more slowly.

[BCAA Traffic Safety Foundation](#)

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Overall, older adults are relatively safe and conscientious drivers. However, for some seniors, the physical changes of aging can interfere with driving responsibly. Senior drivers can compensate for the factors of aging that interfere with safe driving and they can adapt their driving practices to prolong the ability to drive. If they aren't able to drive, there are numerous transportation options available to assist in the transition from driver to passenger.

If you are concerned about the driving abilities of a senior close to you, see [Senior Citizen Driving: Warning Signs and Helping an Unsafe Driver to Stop Driving](#).

Lessening the risk factors of aging that can affect safe driving

Safe driving requires a person to make important decisions very quickly when they are behind the wheel. A driver must:

- see and hear clearly
- synthesize different types of information right away
- act quickly and decisively

If a senior who is close to you is still able to drive safely, you can help the senior to lessen the risk factors of aging that can affect their driving.

Ideas for Mitigating the Risk Factors of Aging That Can Affect Safe Driving	
If you're worried about...	Try the following...

Visual decline	Get eyes checked at least annually, and make sure that corrective lenses are current. Keep the windshield, mirrors, and headlights clean, and turn brightness up on the instrument panel. How is Your Vision? will help a senior to evaluate their vision.
Hearing loss	Have hearing checked annually, and make sure the senior wears their hearing aids when driving. Driving requires both good vision and good hearing.
Limited mobility and increased reaction time	An occupational therapist or a certified driving rehabilitation specialist can prescribe special equipment to make it easier for a senior to steer their car and operate the foot pedals. How is Your Physical Fitness? discusses signs of decreased physical fitness and preventative tips.
Medications	Talk with a doctor about the effects of certain medications on driving ability. Drugs and the Older Driver includes a list of medications that may impair driving skills.
Drowsiness	Try to improve the senior's nighttime sleep conditions and talk with a doctor about the effect of any sleep medications on driving. See Tips for a Good Night's Sleep for information about sleeping well and Sleeping and Driving Don't Mix for helpful self-evaluation tips.
Dementia and brain impairment	If you notice signs of dementia or brain impairment in the senior, limit their driving and consult a doctor. Alzheimer's, Dementia & Driving and How is Your Attention and Reaction Time? are good resources on cognitive decline and driving.

Tips to help seniors drive safely

You can take an active role in helping a senior to drive more safely. Following are some tips for a senior to stay on the road. Help the senior to implement these safe driving adjustments.

Tips on your car:

- **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 that compensate for physical problems. For tips on making sure your car fits you and on how to adjust car mirrors for maximum visibility, see [CarFit: Helping Mature Drivers Find Their Perfect Fit](#) (PDF).
- **Keep your car in peak operating condition.** Visit your mechanic for scheduled maintenance, and keep your car windows and headlights clean.

Tips on the road:

- **Drive during daylight hours if you have trouble seeing well in reduced light.**
- **Consider staying off the freeway or highway** if fast-moving traffic bothers you.
- **Avoid driving in bad weather** (rain, thunderstorms, snow, hail, ice).
- **Plan your route** before you leave the house so that you feel more confident and don't get lost. Online services such as [Mapquest](#), [Google Maps](#), and [Yahoo Maps](#) can be very helpful. Mapquest even has an "avoid highways" routing alternative under *Advanced Options*.
- **Focus on the road.** Carry a cell phone for emergencies, but don't use it while driving. Some cars have controls for the radio on the steering wheel that require no reaching and no looking. Eating and conversation may be distracting while driving.
- **Don't follow too closely.** Use the **three-second rule**: choose a stationary object on the road ahead of you, start counting when the car in front of you passes that object, then allow three seconds until you pass that object. You can figure three seconds by saying to yourself, "a thousand one, a thousand two, a thousand three." If you pass that object sooner than in three seconds, maintain a longer following distance.
- **Yield the right of way** at an intersection if you are in doubt. The majority of senior-citizen accidents happen because

the senior has not yielded the proper right of way.

- **Be careful of left-turns.** Seniors have a large number of accidents at intersections when they are making left turns. If you wish, you can even avoid left turns by turning right instead, and making successive right turns to go around the block or blocks to get to your destination.
- **Be considerate of others if you drive slowly.** On the highway, if other drivers are passing you in the lanes on both sides of you, be sure to move over to travel in the slow lane. On two-lane roads, be aware of cars lining up behind you. Pull over to a safe spot on the right side of the road to let other cars get around you.

Tips for overall safety:

- **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 [AARP Driver Safety](#) for classroom as well as online driving courses for seniors.
- **See your health care provider regularly.** Have your vision, hearing, and general health checked regularly. Be sure to discuss any **medications** you are taking (even over-the-counter ones), and ask about their possible effects on your driving.
- **Maintain physical and mental fitness!** With your doctor's approval, some stretching exercises, a walking program, or a yoga class may help you stay fit. Fitness affects your driving abilities: you need to be flexible, have quick response time, and be able to move your hands and feet quickly to control the car.

Transportation alternatives available for seniors

If an elderly person is going to stop driving, alternative modes of transportation will facilitate errands, going to doctors' appointments, and continuing to attend social and cultural events. If transportation is not available, a senior will be much less willing to give up driving. Getting out of the house is essential not just for practical reasons, but also for participation in life! An increasing number of innovative ways for seniors to get around without a car are available. These include:

- ride-sharing with friends and relatives
- public transit: buses, subways, and light rail
- community shuttles
- taxis, limousines, and chauffeur services
- private drivers
- specialized transit for seniors
- bicycles or tricycles (you can find large tricycles made for adults)
- walking
- motorized wheelchairs for nonambulatory seniors

You may think that paid transportation is not affordable, but money saved on car insurance, maintenance, registration, and gasoline can be used for rides. To encourage a senior to use alternative transportation, you might ride along the first few. If you offer rides to the senior, set up a regular time when the person can count on you to be there, without their asking. See if other friends or relatives can do the same. Many seniors find it difficult to ask for a ride, so if you schedule it regularly, the awkwardness is diminished.

For help in finding transit services for seniors, check:

- [AARP's listing of transportation options, by State](#)
- [Public Transit Systems in Your Community](#), from the American Public Transportation Association
- [Supplemental Transportation Programs Listing by State](#), a senior transportation program developed by the Beverly Foundation and the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
- [ITNAmerica Affiliate Communities](#), "dignified transportation" for seniors who no longer drive
- your local senior center (the [Eldercare Locator](#) can help you find a senior center in your area)
- senior-service organizations

- interfaith and church-based programs
- your local Area Agency on Aging (see the [Eldercare Locator](#))
- a nearby adult day care center or senior housing facility
- volunteer service programs ([Red Cross](#) , [American Cancer Society](#).)
- volunteer transportation programs

When you seek senior transportation, don't forget that it should cover outings that improve quality of life, as well as necessary errands. Both are important to overall well-being.

References and resources for safe senior citizen driving

Driving tips for seniors

[Driving Safely While Aging Gracefully](#) – Helps seniors assess changes in vision, physical fitness, and reaction time, and offers tips to counteract weaknesses in these areas so the senior can keep driving. Discusses alternative transportation options. (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration)

[How's My Driving? Simple Tips for Maintaining Driving Skills](#) (PDF) – A pamphlet describing risk factors of senior driving, a self-assessment quiz about safe driving, helpful features of newer cars, tips for safe driving, and flexibility exercises. (Meijer Michigan State Police; and Michigan Academy of Family Physicians)

[Driving Decisions Workbook](#) (PDF, rotate it) – A practical workbook for evaluating one's own driving capabilities, with extensive suggestions for working around driving weaknesses. (University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute)

[Driving Safely](#) – Text, ample photos, and videos with tips for safer driving. Includes current driving laws, difficult driving situations, and how to deal with an unfamiliar rental car. (SeniorDrivers.org, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety)

[Drivers 55 Plus: Self-Rating Form](#) – A driving self-awareness quiz. Helps the senior to pinpoint areas of driving weakness, then to remediate them. Answer the quiz and get a customized set of tips for driving safely. (AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety)

[Driving Safely](#) – How to assess if a senior is driving safely, and how to help them stay driving safely, if they remain on the road. Includes a section on vehicle adjustments. (New York State Office for the Aging)

[Safe Driving Tips](#) – Take the quiz, then scroll down for detailed tips on how to deal with specific driver safety issues. (BCAA Traffic Safety Foundation)

Driver safety refresher courses

[AARP Driver Safety](#) – A classroom course designed for older drivers to help them hone their skills and avoid accidents and traffic violations. Website features information on the classes and on senior driving in general, including FAQs, a driving IQ test, a close call test, and a link to [find a course in your area](#). (AARP)

[AARP Driver Safety Online Course](#) – A driver safety refresher course for the over-50 age group. The same material as the classroom course, but online. You can take the online version in the comfort of your own home. (AARP)

Transportation alternatives for senior drivers

[Public Transit Systems in Your Community](#) – Links to public transit offerings throughout the United States. Click on the map and then on your county to narrow down the listing. (American Public Transportation Association)

[State-by-State Guide to Transportation Assistance](#) – A thorough guide to finding links to senior transportation in your area. (AARP)

[ITNAmerica Affiliate Communities](#) – Listing of communities with Independent Transportation Network rides for seniors. ITN's philosophy is dignified transportation for seniors who no longer drive. See the [Overview of ITN Service Features](#).

[Supplemental Transportation Programs Listing by State](#) – Transportation programs for seniors throughout the U.S., developed according to [The Concept and Practice of STPs](#). (SeniorDrivers.org, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, and the Beverly Foundation)

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