



# Helping Older Drivers Stay Safe:

A Guide for Family & Friends



# Introduction

For many adults, driving represents independence and control over our lives – our ability to go where we want, when we want. Most of us need to use a car to get to work, and even if we’re retired, we need a car to run errands and get around. Driving helps us stay connected with friends and the things we enjoy. It is especially important in suburban and rural areas, where there are few alternatives to the personal automobile for transportation.

For anyone who’s had the experience of temporarily being unable to drive, we know the disruption that not having access to our personal vehicle causes, for even a day. So it’s understandable that older adults find the prospect of not driving a difficult issue to face.

The good news is that, with some planning and communication, cutting back or “retiring” from driving can be a gradual process that allows the older driver and their family and friends to make decisions and adjust to new circumstances together, rather than a sudden event that causes distress and isolation.

This guide will help you, as a family member or friend, know when and how to get involved in an older person’s decision on whether they should modify their driving routine, or if it would be safer if they no longer drove. You’ll also find information on how PennDOT’s license evaluation and recall process works, and additional resources to help refresh driver knowledge and skills.

# What to Watch For

## Observation and Assessment of Driving Skills

Helping an older driver stay safe starts with paying attention to how well they are performing tasks, both inside the car and out.

When driving, are they stopping at all stop signs and looking both ways to check for cross traffic? Stopping at red lights? Appropriately yielding the right-of-way? Merging and changing lanes safely? Or are they exhibiting less threatening but still unsafe behaviors, such as slowing or stopping where they shouldn't be, driving too fast or getting lost? If this is the case, their driving poses an immediate threat to their safety and the safety of others, and action should be taken.

Off the road, are they frequently forgetful? Do they seem to be having more trouble walking, maybe because of trouble with stiffening joints or foot pain? Have they mentioned or have you observed any dizziness or shortness of breath? If they're having more trouble with daily tasks or just getting around the house, these problems may also limit their ability to handle their car and react appropriately to unexpected traffic situations.

Age is not the only factor in the ability to drive safely, but there are a number of physical changes that commonly occur with age and may affect driving. As we age, our reflexes often slow down. Our eyes, ears, and brain may not react to or anticipate events like they did when we were younger. This happens to everyone in varying degrees, and we all have to make adjustments. Next, we'll discuss some of the changes you may want to discuss with an older family member or friend.

## **Changes in Vision**

Good vision is essential to safe driving. Experts believe nearly all of the information we need to drive is received through our eyes. But over time, nearly everyone's vision declines. An older person may have difficulty focusing on objects and switching focus from near to far or far to near. The ability to see fine detail may diminish.

Peripheral vision (the ability to see things to the side without turning one's head), may also change with age. This is significant, since almost all of what we see when we drive is seen first peripherally.

Driving at night may become more difficult. This is common because as we age, we need more light to see. An older driver may also find it harder to adjust to glare from approaching headlights and may notice a weakening in depth perception (i.e., the ability to judge distances).

Vision problems should be checked by an eye care professional. Some of the risks can be decreased by changing an eyeglass prescription or by simply changing a few driving habits, like limiting night driving.

## **Decline in Hearing**

Some hearing loss is common among people age 65 and older. High-pitched sounds may become less audible long before low-pitched ones do. This is important because horns, sirens and train whistles are high pitched. Studies show people who have hearing difficulties are more likely to be inattentive to their surroundings. Family or friends who suspect an older person doesn't hear well should recommend a hearing exam and offer to go along for support.

## **Slowing of Mental Functions**

One of the crucial functions of safe driving is “reaction time”—the time it takes for the eyes to see, the brain to process what is seen, and tell the body how to react. Reaction time slows with age, but an older driver can compensate by keeping a good distance from the car ahead and avoiding rush-hour traffic. Processing new information and making quick judgments are essential skills in driving, but they can become impaired.

Family and friends may notice changes in the older driver, such as getting lost on the way to a location that is very familiar to them; forgetting the date of an important event; or becoming nervous or agitated while in the car, either as a driver or passenger. Family and friends should be aware that these changes may occur, and help the older driver recognize the changes and make alternative transportation choices.

## **Impact of Health Issues or Medications**

Conditions like arthritis, diabetes, heart disease or nervous disorders can all affect driving, so it's important to have regular medical checkups. Even with a medical condition, older drivers may still be able to drive safely, as long as they follow doctors' instructions. More serious medical conditions might restrict the ability to drive safely.

Medications can affect driving ability at any age, but especially for an older person. Even over-the-counter medicines can have adverse and unplanned side effects. Anyone taking prescription or over-the-counter medicines should ask their health care provider or pharmacist about the possible side effects, especially as they relate to driving. When the warning label states “Don't operate heavy machinery” - Remember, your vehicle is considered heavy machinery!

Of course, anyone taking medication should avoid alcoholic beverages and should always follow the directions that advise against driving when taking certain medications. Sometimes medications won't affect driving when taken separately, but will affect driving when taken together with another medication.

# What to Ask an Older Driver

Even an older driver who passes a driver's exam today may not be completely comfortable behind the wheel. Here are some questions you may want to ask:

- Do you feel less comfortable driving now than you did five years ago?
- Have you had more near-accidents in the last year or so?
- Do intersections bother you because of all the cars and activity in several directions?
- Is it harder to judge the distance and speed of cars when you merge into traffic?
- Is night driving more difficult because of glare and blurred vision?

If an older driver answers “yes” to one or more of the above questions, suggest that he or she enrolls in a driver refresher course or visits a health care provider. Check out the suggested resources listed in the back of this guide to share with them.



# Helping an Older Driver Cope and Plan

Ideally, retiring from driving is a planned process that happens gradually and allows the older driver and family members to adjust to changes. As these adjustments take place, you need to consider:

1. Is the older person driving safely within their limitations?
2. If there is a problem, health-wise or skill-wise, can it be corrected?
3. What other transportation options do we have and how can others play a role in either accessing or providing those options?

## Planning for New Routines

To help an older adult be prepared for limitations placed on their driving habits or even the possibility of not being able to drive at all, you should help encourage him or her to start planning.

The best way to put a plan together is to understand the older driver's transportation needs and priorities. If you live nearby, this is easier to do through observation and conversation. But even if you don't, talk with the older driver about their activities.

- Are there evening social activities that they can get a ride to instead of driving at night? Even better, are there some activities that can move to daytime hours?
- Are there services they'd be willing to use to lighten their load of errands, such as grocery delivery? Are there places they visit regularly where they'd be willing to use transportation assistance from a local agency?
- If they belong to a group that meets regularly, such as a book club, with the help of a family member or friend can they host more activities at their home instead of traveling?

If there are other family members or friends available, talk with them to see if they have made some of the same observations you've made. Using the information in this guide, discuss how you may be able to help the driver. This might be a good time to establish or strengthen contact with neighbors and others in the older driver's immediate network. In addition to talking with an older driver, you may need to talk frankly with other family members to see what each of you can do to "step up" and help the older driver maintain mobility and routine.

Many older drivers already understand that they need to consider limiting their driving and are eager to avoid stressful driving situations. But decisions about driving can be tough for an older adult to make alone. The best approach you can take as a concerned family member is to cultivate an attitude of asking questions in a nonjudgmental, respectful tone, listening to the older person's thoughts, and helping them process the situation in a constructive way.







## **Coping with Feelings**

It is important to understand that even after taking steps to correct diminished eyesight or hearing, or avoiding adverse reactions to medication, an older person still may not feel comfortable behind the wheel. Encourage the older person to discuss this with you, another family member or friend, or a health care provider. It may be that there are solutions (such as cataract surgery, for example) that could make a big difference in the older person's ability to get around, or it could be that they might need to begin restricting their driving behaviors.

Be sensitive to and respectful of the older person's feelings at this time. Expect some emotional reactions and allow the person to express feelings and adjust. Major lifestyle changes are never easy, and no longer being able to drive a car is a loss that can build on previous losses, such as the death of a spouse or friends or the decline of their own health. This is also often a time when an older person may want to reassess their living situation in terms of their mobility and proximity to people and places that are most important to them.

# Moving Right Along... Helpful Tips for Older Drivers

Let's say the older driver doesn't have any impairment that affects driving. There are still a number of safe-driving habits that should be routine. These are true at any age, so if you are assisting an older relative or friend to improve his or her driving habits, you might want to heed the following advice as well.

- Planning ahead, especially for a long trip, is a key to safe driving.
- Don't like night driving? Plan any lengthy car trips for daylight hours. Morning may be best because most people are not as tired as they could be in the afternoon. It might also be advisable for the older person to run errands in the morning, fresh from a good night's sleep.
- Hate rush-hour traffic? Know what roads near home are most congested during rush hour and avoid them.
- When driving long distances, especially in winter, call or go online for weather and road condition updates.
- When traveling over unfamiliar roads, if you have a GPS, use it! This device is great for guiding you visually and verbally, and helping you stay focused on the road. If you don't have a GPS, use marked maps available from travel clubs, or mark your own map. It is also advisable to calculate the distance and expected time of arrival at the intermediate points or route changes on the trip. It might also help to list route changes, town names or landmarks in order on a sheet of paper and check each one off as they are reached (but don't do this while driving – pull into a rest area or other safe spot away from the road!)

- When traveling with others, assign a navigator to check off landmarks as you pass them, consult the map to make sure you are on course or read directions aloud.
- Look ahead. Good drivers get a jump on potential trouble by looking far down the road and making adjustments before encountering problems that may involve other vehicles, pedestrians, bicyclists or animals.
- Maintain a safe speed. A safe speed will depend on what the road is like, how well the driver can see, how much traffic there is and how fast it is moving.
- Communicate with other drivers. Use headlights, brakes, hazard lights and turn signals; also don't hesitate to use the horn when necessary. A driver should always keep a safe distance from the vehicle ahead.



## **Refreshing and Improving Skills**

It's a good idea for drivers of all ages to learn everything they can about how to drive better and take advantage of the latest safety features available. Many organizations in Pennsylvania offer driving refresher courses, both online and in the classroom, as well as information and tips for mature drivers to stay mobile and safe. Taking a refresher course may even get older drivers a discount on their auto insurance premium. In fact, since we can all stand to improve our skills, you may want to join them and take the course yourself. Mature Driver Improvement Program classes for drivers aged 55 and older are provided at the back of this guide.

## **Staying Familiar with the Pennsylvania Driver's Manual**

It may be that an older driver is doing something incorrectly on the roadway simply because that's the way they've always done it, but the rule has changed. There have been a number of changes in laws and regulations in recent years; changes drivers of all ages should be aware of. So it's always good to consult the Pennsylvania Driver's Manual. Manuals are available on PennDOT's website at [www.dmv.pa.gov](http://www.dmv.pa.gov).

# **How PA's Driver's License Recall and the Renewal Process Work**

In the interest of roadway safety, PennDOT has a responsibility and the authority to evaluate a driver's ability to continue to operate an automobile, and to restrict or recall their driving privileges as needed.

If an older person you know has had a medical condition reported to PennDOT, or if you feel that their condition should be reported, the Q & A on the next few pages explains how this process works. It's important to understand (and to help an older driver understand) being reported to PennDOT does not necessarily mean that their license will be taken away.

## **How does PennDOT determine when a driver needs a physical, vision or driver's exam in order to have a license renewed?**

There are several ways PennDOT determines when a driver should be tested:

1. Medically impaired drivers of all ages may be identified by health care providers. By law, all physicians and others authorized to diagnose and treat disorders and disabilities must report to PennDOT every person age 15 or older diagnosed as having a condition that could impair his/her ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.
2. Police and accident reports on drivers of all ages also help PennDOT determine who should be evaluated and PennDOT may request medical or driver's exams for those reported. Also, PennDOT receives letters from concerned family members and others. Drivers identified through these letters may be asked to submit medical information.
3. Each month, drivers over the age of 45 are chosen at random for retesting seven months before license renewal and are required to undergo vision and physical exams by a health care provider(s) of their own choice. In the event the results of those exams suggest a need, the driver will also be required to take a driver's examination.



## **When does PennDOT deny a license renewal or recall a license?**

When PennDOT receives medical information from a doctor, it starts an evaluation process. Based on the information submitted, one or more of the following may occur:

1. Restrictions to the person's driving privilege may be added or deleted;
2. The person's license may be recalled or restored;
3. The person may be asked to provide more specific medical information or complete a drivers examination; or
4. No action may be taken.

PennDOT, not the physician, makes the license determination.

## **Is there an appeals process?**

Yes, the driver may appeal the recall or suspension of their driving privilege through the Court of Common Pleas in their county of residence.

## **What can family members and friends do when a driver continues to drive against the advice of his doctor and others?**

Using tricks – like hiding keys – to reduce driving is not recommended. It is better to maintain a sense of trust in your relationship. Encourage the person to make a decision to reduce or stop driving as appropriate. Be aware that people who lose the privilege of driving often feel lonely or anxious because they have fewer opportunities to be with friends or involved in activities.

If the driver will not listen to reason, you may want to discuss the problem with his or her doctor to find out if there are medical reasons that should be reported. The doctor may also decide to refer the older person to a driving clinic to help make a more accurate judgement.

If you decide your only choice is to report the driver to PennDOT to make a determination, you may send a detailed letter regarding your observations and, if known, the driver's specific medical condition(s) to PennDOT.

The letter must also include your name and contact information. PennDOT does not accept anonymous reports.

This letter can be mailed to:

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

P.O. Box 68682

Harrisburg, PA 17106-8682

Once received, PennDOT will investigate the report and may require that the older driver take a medical or driver's exam, or both.

### **If a family member, a friend or a physician reports an unsafe driver, will PennDOT tell the driver who reported them?**

Reports submitted to PennDOT are confidential and used solely to determine the qualification of an individual to drive a motor vehicle. PennDOT acts in accordance of these provisions and will not release information regarding the source or content of the report, even when the inquiry is from the patient or driver reported. However, if the driver's license is not renewed, is recalled, or is suspended and the driver appeals through the judicial system, the report may be admitted as evidence in court proceedings that are open to the public.

### **If an older driver stops driving, what alternative means of transportation does Pennsylvania provide?**

Older Pennsylvanians are eligible for the Free Transit Program and the Shared Ride Program. A link to these services through the Pennsylvania Department of Aging is listed at the end of this guide.

# Mature Driver Improvement Courses

Under PA law individuals may be entitled to at least a 5 percent discount on their entire automobile insurance policy if they are 55 or older and successfully complete a driver improvement course approved by PennDOT. Those interested should check with their insurance carrier for the specifics of their program.

Please refer to the PennDOT website [www.penndot.pa.gov](http://www.penndot.pa.gov) to see all state approved courses that are held at various locations throughout the Commonwealth as well as Online.

All approved courses specifically address the safety needs of the mature driver. There are no written or practical driving tests required. The course fees are moderate, but vary with each organization.





# More Safety Resources for Senior Drivers

## **Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT)**



717-412-5300 • 1101 S. Front Street • Harrisburg, PA 17104

[www.penndot.gov/safety](http://www.penndot.gov/safety)

The Traffic Safety and Driver Topics section of this website contains an array of information pertaining to safely operating a motor vehicle.

[www.dmv.pa.gov/Driver-Services/Mature-Drivers](http://www.dmv.pa.gov/Driver-Services/Mature-Drivers)

The Mature Driver section of PennDOT's website offers resources for drivers including safety tips, improvement courses and licensing laws as well as information for the health care community and medical reporting tools.

## **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)**



1-888-327-4236

[www.nhtsa.gov/Driving+Safety/Older+Drivers](http://www.nhtsa.gov/Driving+Safety/Older+Drivers)

NHTSA offers guides, research reports and toolkits for mature drivers and those around them, including family and friends, medical professionals and law enforcement officers.

## **Pennsylvania Department of Aging (PDA)**



717-783-1550 • 555 Walnut Street, 5th Fl. • Harrisburg, PA 17101

[www.aging.pa.gov/aging-services/transportation](http://www.aging.pa.gov/aging-services/transportation)

The Aging Services/ Transportation section of this website provides details on the PA Free Transit Program for individuals 65+, the Shared Ride Program, and also offers additional resources and links.

## CarFit

[www.car-fit.org](http://www.car-fit.org)

CarFit is an educational program that offers older adults the opportunity to check how well their personal vehicles “fit” them.

The CarFit program also provides information and materials on community- specific resources that could enhance their safety as drivers, and/or increase their mobility in the community.



## The Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED)

Driver Rehabilitation Specialists work with people of all ages and abilities, exploring alternative transportation solutions for drivers with special needs or who may need



to use special equipment to continue to drive. This includes helping older drivers and their families master the challenges of diminishing driving skills. Please visit [www.aded.net](http://www.aded.net) and click on Directory & Services, then click on DRS or CDRS Provider Search.

## PA Yellow Dot

[www.pennidot.gov/TravelInPA/Pages/Yellow-Dot.aspx](http://www.pennidot.gov/TravelInPA/Pages/Yellow-Dot.aspx)

This program assists citizens in the “golden hour” of emergency care following a traffic accident when they may not be able to communicate their needs themselves. Placing a Yellow Dot decal in your vehicle’s rear window alerts first responders to check your glove compartment for vital information to ensure you receive the medical attention you need. The program is a cooperative effort between PennDOT, the Department of Health and Aging, the State Police, the Turnpike Commission, first responders and local law enforcement.



## The Emergency Contact Information Program

The Emergency Contact Information Program was developed to allow your emergency contact information to be quickly available to law enforcement through a secure online database. Just



**Upload Emergency  
Contact Information**

visit [www.dmv.pa.gov](http://www.dmv.pa.gov) and click on the icon you see to the right to use your Pennsylvania Driver’s License or ID information to enter emergency contacts to speak for you if ever you can’t speak for yourself.



# About PennDOT and our Seniors Driving Safely Series

PennDOT oversees a breadth of programs and policies that ensure that the movement of people and goods within the state is safe, reliable, and efficient. We oversee an ongoing investment in the integrity of Pennsylvania's highway and bridge infrastructure. PennDOT is directly responsible for nearly 40,000 miles of highway and roughly 25,000 bridges. We also administer the state's more than 11 million vehicle registrations and 8.9 million driver's licenses and oversee safety and emission inspection programs.

While PennDOT strives to set the standard for an organized transportation structure and maintain a reliable infrastructure throughout Pennsylvania, our mission cannot be completed without the compliance and cooperation of those who utilize and operate within our state's roadways and multimodal systems. Our *Seniors Driving Safely Series* is one facet of our effort to help educate, guide, remind, assist, and protect all Pennsylvanians in getting wherever they need to go – safely.