



Time to hand over the keys?

Know when – and how – to have a discussion about an elderly family member’s driving ability

By Thomas J. Bukowski

The ability to drive is often thought of as a symbol of independence. Because of this, it can be difficult to ask an elderly family member to stop driving for safety reasons.

Although having this conversation with an elderly family member may be uncomfortable, “a car is a lethal weapon,” said Carolyn Rosenblatt, registered nurse, elder-law attorney and

mediator, and aging issues expert at AgingParents.com. “Family members need a lot of support and guidance to take that step to tell their loved one that their driving is unsafe to them and to others,” she said.

Warning signs

As they age, some seniors may develop impairments in vision, memory and flexibility that can make driving difficult and unsafe, according to Elizabeth Dugan, associate professor of gerontology at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Dugan identified three levels of warning signs to use when assessing an older driver:

- **Level 1:** Difficulty getting in or out of the vehicle, difficulty scanning over the steering wheel or shoulder

- **Level 2:** Dents or scratches on the vehicle, multiple near misses in a short time period, getting lost in familiar areas, difficulty navigating basic traffic situations such as merging
- **Level 3:** Multiple crashes, tickets or police warnings in a two-year or shorter time span

At the first level signs, family members should begin checking on the older driver annually – or more often if the situation appears more serious, Dugan advised.

Family members should attempt to get a “bird’s-eye view” of how the senior drives, recommended Julie Lee, vice president and national director of AARP Driver Safety, a driver improvement program for older drivers.

“Try and be in the passenger seat while your loved one goes to a doctor’s appointment,” Lee said. “That way, you can notice it and start to bring up the conversation, such as, ‘Hey mom, you ran that stop sign there – is everything OK?’”

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Carolyn Rosenblatt, AgingParents.com

Making accommodations

Although family members may want to take away the car keys immediately after the first warning sign, other steps can be taken to safely extend older drivers’ time behind the wheel, Dugan said. Family members can take seniors to a certified driving rehabilitation specialist, who can assess their driving strengths and weaknesses and recommend alterations to the vehicle, she said. Alterations may include installing hand controls or seat or mirror adjustments to increase the driver’s ability to see the roadway.

Another option is enrolling the senior driver in a driving skills training course. Alexander Pollatsek, professor emeritus in the Department of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, recently co-authored a study published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (Vol. 21, No. 1) that found a driving skills training program was effective in increasing older

drivers’ safety. Seniors who are nervous about their driving ability “mainly are trying to not hit someone with their car, and are not considering being hit by someone,” Pollatsek said. Skills training can teach them surveillance behaviors that will increase their safety behind the wheel, such as watching for other vehicles that may strike their vehicle during a turn or merge, he said.

Seniors facing driving difficulties also could adjust their habits to accommodate deficiencies, Lee said. For example, they could avoid driving on high-speed roadways or replace all left-hand turns with three right-hand turns, she said. Rosenblatt said her mother-in-law has been able to continue driving through age 88 by completely avoiding nighttime driving.

A driving intervention

If a senior is unable to drive safely even with accommodations or skills training but still refuses to stop driving, family members need to take action, Rosenblatt said. She recommends five levels of increasingly direct intervention:

- **One-on-one meeting:** First, approach the aging driver alone during a quiet time. Be direct and respectful.
- **Two-on-one meeting:** Team up with someone the older family member trusts, such as a friend or clergy member.
- **Discuss with professional help:** Research and find a neutral professional mediator, such as a social

worker or medical professional, to speak with the aging family member.

- **Intervention:** Have a professional mediator conduct an intervention involving family members and friends to convince the senior to stop driving and be evaluated by a certified driving rehabilitation specialist.
- **Use the law as a last resort:** Request a physician or rehabilitation specialist send a letter to the local department of motor vehicles to revoke the person’s driver’s license.

Alternative methods of transportation

Once your loved one has given up the keys, you can help him or her find an alternative method of transportation. Lee said one of the more creative solutions she recalls is when a son sold his mother’s vehicle and used the proceeds to establish a fund with a company that would provide the mother with private trips at a moment’s notice.

Public transportation may be an option for someone who shouldn’t be driving. However, family members should make sure the senior is both physically and mentally well enough to take public transportation, said Elin Schold Davis, Older Driver Initiative project coordinator for the American Occupational Therapy Association.

“Part of beginning to safely use public transportation is learning how to do it,” she said. “For families, if a loved one is switching to public transit, they should ride with the loved one a few times until they get comfortable,” Schold Davis said. **FS&H**



Photo: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Resources on senior driving

- View guidelines for when older family members should stop driving: www.caring.com/articles/when-to-stop-driving
- Learn about the effects of aging on driving skills: www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/older-drivers
- Check your state’s senior driving laws: www.iihs.org/laws/olderdrivers.aspx
- Find transportation options for seniors in your area: <http://seniordriving.aaa.com/map>