

When is it time to quit driving?

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If you talk to older people, they will often tell you that the toughest thing they had to confront was when to stop driving. From the time we get our license as a teenager, it becomes evidence as our status as an adult and our independence.

When a person is diagnosed with dementia, the issue of safe driving is paramount. When to stop driving is often one of the most sensitive issues that families have to confront.

Age is not the primary culprit in driving safety. The Virginia GrandDriver* captures this in a clever adage: "In Virginia, 65 is a speed limit, not an age limit." And AARP backs that statement in an article the November 2006 Bulletin, quoting Joe Coughlin, director of the MIT AgeLab. "Birthdays don't cause accidents – health issues do."

So, can the issue of when to give up driving be evaluated? The AARP article (referred to above) summarizes the issue as a combination of both physical and mental fitness, regardless of age. Dementia, confusion, visual impairments, side effects from some medications, and physical impairments from some disease processes are a few of the conditions that can interfere with driving ability.

The Alzheimer's Association recognizes that a diagnosis of the disease alone is not, on its own, a sufficient reason to withdraw driving privileges.

People in the early stages of a progressive disease such as Alzheimer's are often capable of driving safely for a while, particularly in familiar places and on short trips.

However, as the disease progresses, cognitive impairment associated with dementia disrupts a person's ability to think, judge, reason, pay attention, and react during a complex and fast paced activity like operating a motor vehicle. The Virginia GrandDriver website reports that a typical driver makes 20 decisions per mile, with less than half a second to act to avoid a collision. Individuals behind the wheel need to be able to sense, decide, and act very rapidly.

Understanding when driving is no longer safe can be challenging for the person with dementia and for concerned friends and family. Be alert to changes over time, such as getting lost or disoriented in once familiar places, unexplained damage to the vehicle, traffic tickets, over – or under – reacting to emergency vehicles, traffic flow, or when merging into traffic, and missing traffic signals, to name a few. Also realize that insight into one's own shortcomings can be impaired, so take cues from others – regular occurrences of unhappy gestures or horn blowing from fellow drivers, as well as comments made by passengers, could be more than just a hint. An independent driving evaluation might also be beneficial. As with other

important life decisions, such as financial and care planning, it is helpful for families to talk about driving issues during the early stages of the disease process. If possible, talk about action steps for later on. Consider signing an agreement that acknowledges others may have to help make the decision and that the driver will abide by the decision when the time comes.

The Washington State Department of Licensing states that "your responsibility includes recognizing conditions which may affect your ability to drive safely." Their responsibility is to "ensure the safety of our citizens on the highways."

There are numerous resources to help determine when driving is no longer safe. There are also a number of helpful websites that can be used as a starting point in this decision making process. A partial list is available below. Contact the Chapter for a more detailed resource list and to learn about alternative transportation options.

**A program of the Virginia Department for the Aging, administered by the VA Department of Motor Vehicles.*

Driver safety resources

AARP Driver Safety Online Course:

www.aarp.org/families/driver_safety

AARP Driver Safety Program:

www.aarp.org/drive

Hartford/MIT At the Crossroads:

A Guide to Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia & Driving

www.thehartford.com/alzheimers

AAA "Drivers 55Plus: Self-Rating Form:

www.aaafoundation.org/quizzes/index.cfm?button=driver55

Washington State Department of Licensing

www.dol.wa.gov (licensing issues including restricted licenses)

Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialists:

www.driver-ed.org

MIT Age Lab:

web.mit.edu/agelab

For more articles and resources on Alzheimer's and driving contact the Chapter at (206) 363-5500 or visit www.alzwa.org.