



## Talking with Your Aging Parent About Driving

As we age, our abilities to operate a motor vehicle diminish. Vision, hearing, reaction time, judgment, and physical flexibility diminish with the years. And as our parents age, it is only normal to worry about their safety while driving.

Driving represents independence to many people – being able to go, when and where and with whom – is a real privilege. Loss of this privilege is always a concern to elderly people as they face many losses during this life phase. It is only natural that they want to hang on to as many activities and freedoms as they can.

This is never an easy topic of discussion. To you, this may seem to be a matter of good sense, safety, and concern for your parent's well being. To your parent, though, loss of independent driving privileges represents a serious loss of mobility and autonomy.

It is tempting to put this discussion off but if you have concerns about your parents' ability to drive, it is best to address these issues with them promptly as accidents and serious injuries or worse may result.

Considering the consequences of an accident should help you overcome your hesitation -- but it's awkward and painful to have to inform your elderly parents that they aren't capable of doing something as basic and essential as driving the car.

As difficult as it is, if you have reason to believe that your parents could be dangerous behind the wheel, it's important to deal with the issue sooner rather than later -- because later could be *too* late.

Preparing for the discussion also means approaching it with realistic expectations. If you assume that one discussion will neatly resolve the matter, you're bound to be disappointed. Consider this a preliminary discussion only: a way to get the issue out on the table so it can be dealt with openly.

Remember that it's not up to you to convince your parents that they must immediately cease driving, even if you think this is the best course of action. Unless your parents have dementia or are otherwise incapacitated (see below), you need to respect their right to make decisions about their lives -- with your input and support.

Plan your discussion for a time when you and your parents are relaxed and rested.

Try to avoid being too aggressive or the discussion may go off in the wrong direction. Avoid statements that are demanding or threatening, like "You have to stop driving, before you kill someone!" This will probably get the wrong response.

Instead, try a less confrontational approach. If you've noticed that your parent's driving has grown erratic or careless, he's probably aware of it. Try to get your parent to express their own needs and concerns such as opening the discussion with an open-ended question. This approach tends to elicit more positive responses.

For instance, if your parent has gotten a moving violation or been involved with a minor fender-bender, ask him about it, and then follow up with another question like, "Tell me about your driving, Dad? I noticed the speeding ticket. Please tell me about it."

Your parent may respond by telling you many practical reasons he can't stop driving (Golf game, wife's doctor's appointments, trip out of town). This information provides a glimpse into your parent's thinking and concern about how to manage without a car.

Encourage the discussion. Jump in with more questions to explore the matter more fully. Avoid reassurances at this point because they don't offer long term solutions or comfort.

Instead, try to offer helpful comments, such as, "I understand you're worried about giving up the car keys and that might mean giving up some of your independent activities." Be sure to express your concern about your parent's safety as well. This is an important step in working through major problems and transitions while letting your parent know you deeply care about them to help them gradually accept the idea that they will soon have to give up driving.

Ask your parents directly what they think they should do about driving. Help them jot down the pros (reduced expenses) and cons of not driving as well as the potential consequences of being involved in an accident.

This discussion may need to take place over time and in several sittings. Depending on your parent's reception and feelings, you may want to meet again in a couple of days, after thinking about the various factors and plans. This reasoned approach more likely to be productive and positive when approached with a genuine desire to learn more about your parents' experiences, ideas, and concerns.

### **Help your parent.**

You've identified that your parent is difficulty driving. Schedule appointments with their physician (be sure to ask about medications and side effects) and optometrist (make sure the prescription works!) to find out the specific problems.

Make sure their car meet your parent's needs and physical abilities. Ask their doctors whether assistive devices might help address driving difficulties.

### **Intermediate solutions.**

Your parent's physician may suggest limiting driving to daylight hours or essential errands. If your parents are going to continue to drive at all, it's a good idea for them to

brush up on their driving skills and the traffic laws by taking a senior driving refresher course. AARP, AAA, and commercial driving schools all offer such courses.

### **Explore other transportation options.**

Help your parents become familiar with other transportation options like the bus (take a ride with them – it'll be fun!), carpooling or local senior transportation services. Personal assistance services are available to help. Find one that is licensed by the state, bonded and insured.

### **Take a break.**

If your parent gets angry when you try to talk about driving or refuse to discuss it, drop the issue and let things cool down. The passage of time helps. Then bring it up again in a week or two. As they grow used to the idea and realize that the risks of continuing to drive, they may become more receptive.

If you're convinced that your parent poses an immediate risk to himself or others, be prepared to take action, whether he's receptive or not. Go with him to talk with his physician. You can also request permission from your parent to talk to his physician yourself. (HIPPA laws prevent disclosure of medical information without written permission from the patient, unless the person requesting the information has power of attorney.) If the physician shares your concern, he may be willing to talk to your parent.

In Texas, the Texas Department of Public Safety has rules regarding renewal of licenses for elderly drivers (see accompanying article, **Texas Specific Rules for Older Drivers**).

### **Dementia.**

If your parent has dementia, the driving issue is even more urgent. The effects and progress of dementia can be subtle, but they can also have a corrosive effect on decision making and good judgment. A person with dementia may believe that he can drive safely and insist on doing so, no matter how badly impaired he is.

Some people with mild dementia can continue to drive, but if dementia is moderate to severe, the individual should stop driving altogether.

### **Be there.**

Wherever your parents are on the driving continuum -- whether they're still driving, driving with restrictions, or must give up driving altogether -- you can play a valuable role. Most elderly parents dread giving up their car because they fear that it will cut them off from their community and activities they enjoy. Your loving, active participation in their lives will reassure them that ceasing to drive doesn't have to sentence them to isolation and boredom. Make it a habit to check in on your parents often, just to chat or share some news. Offer to drive them to the activities they enjoy when you can -- or help

find someone who can. Include them in family outings, like your children's school events or a day at the beach. Encourage them to try taking the bus on their next trip to the pharmacy. Urge them to ask for rides from friends. Help them develop new routines and interests that don't require driving, like gardening, walking, or swimming. Find a local personal assistance service to assist them with their transportation needs.

**Stay involved.**

Your support and involvement with your parents will help them make the transition successfully.