

All About Aging

by Grace Chen, M.D.

Lookout Points for Safe Senior Driving

Summertime can conjure up images of vacations and road trips. For seniors, however, driving is often a sensitive issue. Take away their license and they lose a big part of their independence.

As we get older, changes associated with normal aging may interfere with our driving ability. Some obvious ones are impaired hearing, vision, memory and judgment. Other medical issues to consider include decreased flexibility, slower reflexes and less coordination, as well as medications that can cause sedation or confusion.

Unfortunately, there is not a single, simple test to determine if someone is a safe driver. Annual physical examinations are important to assess for any medical issues or constellation of issues that may affect driving safety. Report any potential concerns to your physician so that you can be assessed and, if possible, treated to ensure necessary adjustments are made. While a physician may be obligated to

report concerns about a patient's ability to drive safely, it is ultimately the licensing authority, typically the local Department of Motor Vehicles, which determines if a person can continue driving.

Keep in mind that driving is not necessarily an all-or-nothing activity for older adults. Sometimes, a few, simple adjustments — not driving at night or when tired, avoiding rush-hour traffic or staying on local roads rather than highways — can ensure safe driving.

There are programs available to help older drivers adjust to changes associated with aging. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) sponsors driver-refresher courses and other programs that help older drivers deal with age-related issues. The Association for Driver Rehabilitation offers referrals to specialists who can help seniors improve their driving. Local AAA offices typically offer a “Safe Driving for Mature Operators” class. The Veterans



Administration and some rehabilitation centers offer comprehensive driving evaluations through their occupational therapists. These types of comprehensive programs can help seniors understand how to drive more safely and determine if specific equipment can be used to accommodate for impairments. Results are not shared with a licensing authority unless ordered by the court.

Seniors who can no longer drive safely may find it difficult adjusting to life without a car. However, there are numerous alternative transportation options, especially for seniors. These include Dial-a-Ride programs, public transportation and rides from family members, friends and local organizations.

The most important thing to remember is that driving is a privilege, not a right. Safety must come first.

Dr. Grace Chen is a board-certified geriatrician with the top-ranked UCLA Geriatrics Program, with offices in Santa Monica and Westwood. For more information, call (310) 319-4371.

