

Keeping Older Drivers Safe

For most people over the age of 16, driving is an important daily activity that facilitates independence and provides a sense of self-confidence. Yet, as people age, there is an increased likelihood that they will experience changes in vision, memory, and other physical and cognitive characteristics that may challenge their ability to drive safely.

Occupational therapists trained in driver evaluation and rehabilitation can evaluate an older adult's ability to drive by testing his or her vision, reaction time, strength, judgment, and endurance. Although many older adults modify their driving habits as they age by driving less often or only in residential areas during daylight hours, experts are unsure whether older adults modify their driving at an appropriate age or in appropriate ways. Occupational therapy practitioners can frequently help older adults modify their driving habits to enable them to continue to get where they need to go safely and soundly. Practitioners may recommend adaptive equipment or driving strategies that improve driving abilities. They also help older adults identify other ways to get around safely and independently while maintaining their quality of life.

What can an occupational therapist do?

- **Evaluate** older adults to determine any physical, visual, or cognitive limitations that could affect how he or she is able to drive a car.
- **Conduct** an on-the-road driving test to determine how problems identified in the evaluation affect a person's ability to drive safely.
- **Provide** training to drivers that improves their ability to drive safely.
- **Recommend** adaptive equipment and train older drivers how to use the equipment to help them continue to drive and get around safely and appropriately.
- **Help** the older adult identify alternate forms of transportation, such as public transportation, if it becomes clear that the client should no longer drive or should modify when they drive.
- **Consult** with friends and family of an older driver about his or her abilities and how they can ensure the older adult is able to continue participating in activities that give meaning to his or her life.
- **Assist** the older adult who is no longer able to drive to identify meaningful activities that do not require driving.

What can families and friends do for an older driver?

- **Share** your concerns with other family members or friends if you feel an older adult is not safe to drive.
- **Insist** on taking the wheel when you are in the car with someone who is driving in a manner that makes you uncomfortable, especially if children are in the vehicle.
- **Consult** with an occupational therapist or family physician if unsure about an older adult's ability to drive.
- **Ask** the older adult, who is having trouble with driving, to make an appointment for a full evaluation of his or her skills.
- **Help** an older adult who is no longer safe to drive to find alternate means of transportation, such as buses, subways, taxicabs, community vans, and through family and friends.

Need more information?

It is important that older adults who are experiencing changes in their driving abilities be evaluated. If you would like to consult an occupational therapist or driving rehabilitation specialist, practitioners are available through many hospitals, medical centers, and clinics.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping both adults and children with a broad range of physical, developmental, and behavioral issues in addition to driver wellness.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) offers a Web site dedicated to providing the public and health professionals with useful, timely information about older-driver safety and related resources. To learn more, visit AOTA's "Occupational Therapists & Driving" microsite, www.aota.org/olderdriver.

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