

DRIVING SAFELY  
WHILE AGING

*Gracefully*



## Introduction

Driving is a key to independence from the moment we get our first license. Most of us want to hold onto that key for as long as we safely can.



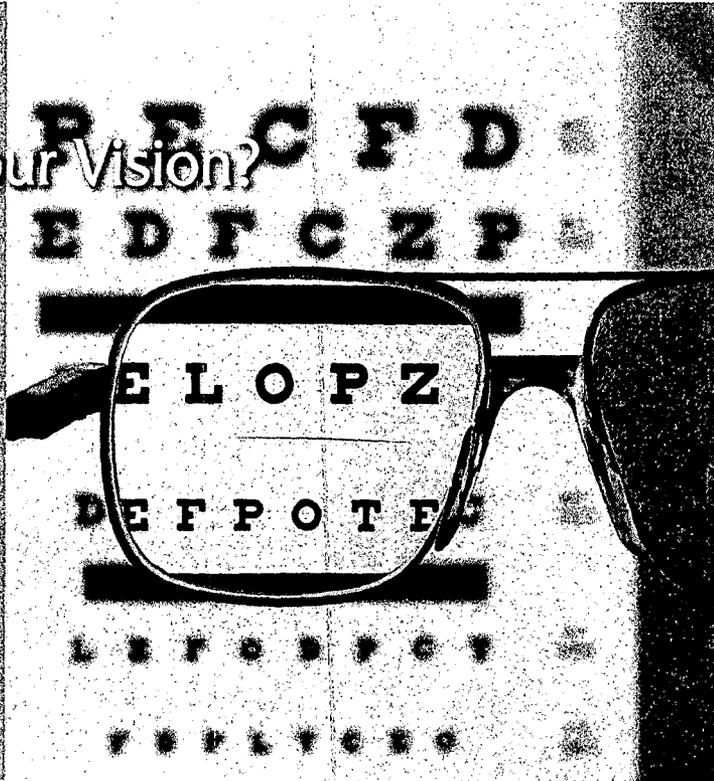
How do you assess whether physical changes are affecting your driving skills?

Most older people are capable and have a lifetime of valuable driving experience. For these reasons, decisions about a person's ability to drive should never be based on age alone. However, changes in vision, physical fitness and reflexes may cause safety concerns. People who accurately assess these changes can adjust their driving habits so that they stay safe on the road, or choose other kinds of transportation.

This booklet, developed by The USAA Educational Foundation, AARP, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, outlines the physical effects of aging, as well as tips on coping with them so that you remain a safe driver as long as you can.

## How is Your Vision?

Good vision is essential for good driving health. But as people age, everyone experiences declines in vision.



Do you have these symptoms of declining vision?

- You have problems reading highway or street signs or recognizing someone you know across the street.
- You have trouble seeing lane lines and other pavement markings, curbs, medians, other vehicles and pedestrians, especially at dawn, dusk and at night.
- You experience more discomfort at night from the glare of oncoming headlights.

- What you can do
- Make sure you always wear your glasses and that they are a current prescription. If you lose or break your glasses, don't rely on an old pair; replace them right away with your newest prescription. Avoid eyewear with side pieces that may block your vision.
  - Do not wear sunglasses or tinted lenses at night. This reduces the amount of light that reaches your eyes and makes driving much more hazardous. Don't darken or tint your car windows. Avoid driving at dawn, dusk and night. If you are extremely light-sensitive, check with your eye doctor to see if it can be corrected.
  - Keep your windshield, mirrors and headlights clean, and make sure your headlight aim is checked when your car is inspected. Choose a car with larger dials and easy-to-read symbols. Turn brightness up on the instrument panel.
  - Sit high enough in your seat so that you can see the road for at least 10 feet in front of your car. This will make a big difference in reducing the amount of glare you experience from opposing headlights at night. Use a cushion if your car seats can't be raised. Also, look to the lower right side of the road when there is oncoming traffic. Some vehicles have rearview mirrors that automatically filter out glare; you might find this feature beneficial, especially for nighttime driving.
  - If you are 60 or older, see an eye doctor every year to check for cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy and other conditions associated with aging.

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## How is Your Physical Fitness?

Diminished strength, coordination and flexibility can have a major impact on your ability to safely control your car.



Do you have these symptoms of decreased physical fitness?

- You have trouble looking over your shoulder to change lanes or looking left and right to check traffic at intersections.
- You have trouble moving your foot from the gas to the brake pedal or turning the steering wheel.
- You have fallen down — not counting a trip or stumble — once or more in the previous year.
- You walk less than one block per day.
- You can't raise your arms above your shoulders.
- You feel pain in your knees, legs or ankles when going up or down a flight of ten stairs.

- What you can do
- ❑ With your doctor's approval, do some stretching exercises and start a walking program. Walk around the block or in a mall. Also, check health clubs, YMCAs, senior centers, colleges and hospitals for fitness programs geared to older people.
  - ❑ Get examined by a doctor if you have pain or swelling in your feet. If you have pain or stiffness in your arms, legs or neck, your doctor may prescribe medication and/or physical therapy.
  - ❑ Choose a car with automatic transmission, power steering and power brakes. See an occupational therapist or a certified driving rehabilitation specialist who can prescribe special equipment to make it easier for you to steer your car and operate the foot pedals.
  - ❑ Eliminate your driver's side blind spot by reaiming your side mirror. First, lean your head against the window, then adjust your mirror outward so that when you look at the inside edge you can barely see the side of your car. If you use a wide-angle mirror, get lots of practice judging distances to other cars before using it in traffic.
  - ❑ Keep alert to sounds outside your car. Limit passenger conversation and background noises from the radio and stereo. If you wear a hearing aid, be careful opening car windows, as some people find drafts can impair the aid's effectiveness.
  - ❑ Watch for flashing lights of emergency vehicles. You may not be able to hear the siren at a distance.
  - ❑ Sit at least ten inches from the steering wheel to reduce the chances of an injury from your air bag. Remember to **always wear your seatbelt.**

## How is Your Attention And Reaction Time?

Driving requires dividing your attention between multiple activities and being able to react quickly to situations that often arise without warning.



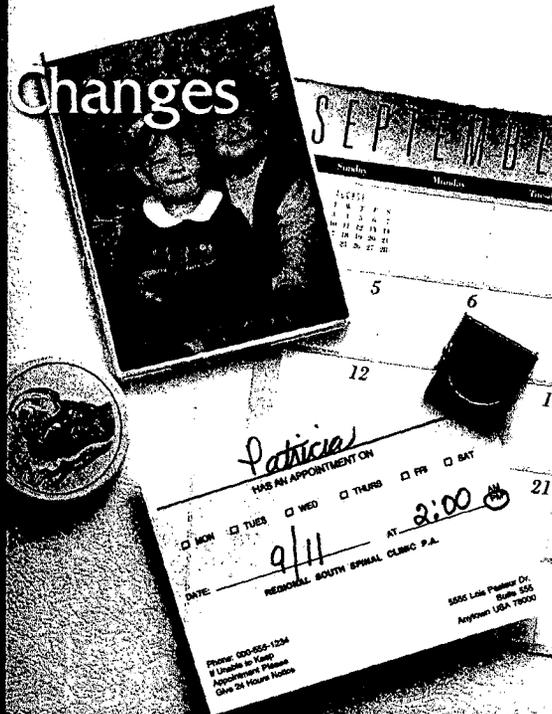
Do you have these symptoms of decreased attention and reaction time?

- You feel overwhelmed by all of the signs, signals, road markings, pedestrians and vehicles that you must pay attention to at intersections.
- Gaps in traffic are harder to judge, making it more difficult to turn left at intersections or to merge with traffic when turning right.
- You take medications that make you sleepy.
- You often get lost or become confused.
- You experience dizziness, seizures or loss of consciousness.
- You aren't confident that you can handle the demands of high speeds or heavy traffic.
- You are slow to see cars coming out of driveways and side streets or to realize that another car has slowed or stopped ahead of you.

- What you can do
- Plan your route. Drive where you are familiar with the road conditions and traffic patterns.
  - Drive during the day and avoid rush hours. Find alternative routes with less traffic.
  - Keep a safe distance between you and the car ahead. Find a marker ahead of you, such as a tree, sign or lamppost. When the car ahead of you passes this marker, count, “1001, 1002, 1003, 1004.” Try to leave enough space so that you reach 1004 before you get to the same point.
  - When approaching intersections, remind yourself to look to the sides of the roads, as well as directly ahead.
  - Try to make left turns at intersections where green arrow signals provide protected turns. Sometimes you can completely avoid left turns by making a right turn at the next intersection. Two more right turns should put you on the street you need.
  - Scan far down the road continuously so that you can anticipate future problems and plan your actions. A passenger can serve as a “second pair of eyes.” But don’t get distracted in conversation!

## Keep Alert To Changes

Everyone wants to maintain their ability to go where they want when they want especially as they grow older and enjoy more leisure time.



Has this happened to you?

- A friend or family member has expressed concern about your driving.
- You sometimes get lost while driving on routes that were once familiar.
- You have been pulled over by a police officer and warned about your poor driving behavior, even if you didn't get a ticket.
- You have had several moving violations, near misses or actual crashes in the last three years.
- Your doctor or other health caregiver has advised you to restrict or stop driving.

- What you can do
- Be aware of your physical limitations and how they may affect your driving.
  - Listen to what people tell you who know you best and care about you most.
  - Discuss driving with your doctor — he or she can evaluate the interactions and side effects of all the medications you may be taking.
  - Refresh your knowledge of safe driving practices and learn about new traffic control and roadway design features through a mature driver class.
  - Begin planning for alternative ways of meeting your transportation needs. Learn about transportation options in your community, then try them out to see which options work best for you.

## Alternative Transportation — It Could Work For You

Depending on where you live, there are often many ways of getting around town without having to use your own car.



Have you considered the options?

- Even if you just want to drive less, there may be more options available to you for getting around than just your family or friends. You may be surprised to find that any one of them is easier than driving and parking your car.
- When tabulating the cost of using another kind of transportation, don't forget to factor in the money you will save in decreased or eliminated costs of owning, maintaining, insuring and parking your car. Look at the cost of the service and the level of convenience you need for each trip you take — you might end up using all of the services at different times.

- What you can do
- Learn what is available in your community.  
Potential services include:
    - City buses, trams and subway systems
    - Taxi cabs and personalized driver services
    - Shuttle buses, such as those offered by churches, senior centers and retirement communities
  - Your local Area Agency on Aging can lead you to transportation services and benefits you might *not be aware of*.
  - If public transportation service is available in your area, ask a friend to help you. Going with someone who knows how to ride the bus or subway may make you feel more secure.
  - Ask questions about the services and schedules of each type of transportation available to you, including whether they offer evening or weekend rides.

## Self-Awareness: The Key To Safe Driving

While everyone wants to keep driving for as long as possible, no one wants to be a threat to themselves or to others because they are no longer able to drive safely.



While most older people take appropriate steps when they detect a problem with their driving, it's not always obvious when a general health problem, vision problem, or a side effect of medications will lead to a driving impairment. That's when the observations loved ones and health professionals are most vital.

Self-awareness is the key. People who can accurately assess their fitness to drive can adjust their driving habits, and stay safe on the road. With smart self-management, you can retain the personal mobility that comes with driving, while limiting the risks to yourself and others.

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## Where To Go For Help

You can find more information on aging and safe driving from these groups.

### **AAA**

1000 AAA Drive  
Heathrow, FL 32746

**407-444-7913**

**www.aaa.com**

Brochures, audiovisuals  
for driving safety.

### **AARP 55 ALIVE**

#### **Mature Driving**

601 E Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20049

**888-227-7669**

**www.aarp.org/55alive**

Brochures, mature  
driving course.

### **ADED:**

#### **The Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists**

P.O. Box 49  
Edgerton, WI 53534

**608-884-8833**

**www.driver-ed.org**

Fact sheets and driver reha-  
bilitation specialist directory.

### **American Occupational Therapy Association**

4720 Montgomery Lane  
Bethesda, MD 20824

**301-652-2682**

**www.aota.org**

Consumer fact sheets on  
specific conditions and  
evaluations, referrals  
to state organizations.

### **Insurance Institute For Highway Safety**

1005 N. Glebe Road  
Arlington, VA 22201

**703-247-1500**

**www.highwaysafety.org**

Brochures on traffic safety.

### **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**

400 Seventh Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20590

**888-327-4236**

**(888-DASH-2-DOT)**

**www.nhtsa.dot.gov**

Brochures on traffic safety.

### **The USAA Educational Foundation**

9800 Fredericksburg Road, D3E  
San Antonio, TX 78288

**800-531-8159**

**www.usaaedfoundation.org**

Brochures on safety topics.

### **U.S. Administration On Aging**

**1-800-677-1116**

**www.aoa.dhhs.gov**

Eldercare Locator, a nationwide  
directory assistance service to  
locate the Area and State Agency  
on Aging in your community.

For benefits and services in your  
community, look in the blue pages  
of your phone book for your state  
Department of Transportation.



*Good Information for Good Decisions<sup>SM</sup>*

The USAA Educational Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing consumer awareness and quality of life through education and research.



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