

Keeping Older Drivers Protected on the Road

By Jane E. Brody

Highway safety experts have long been concerned about a possible epidemic of accidents and fatalities as people in their 70s, 80s and beyond continued to drive. The children of older drivers have worried along with them, sometimes going to extremes to commandeer the keys of their aging parents when reasoning fails to get them off the road.

But new research suggests it may be time for everyone to breathe a little easier and maybe worry instead about young drivers who, as a whole, are more likely than us old-timers to speed and multitask.

Although there are now more older drivers than ever before on American roads, it seems there's never been a safer time for those in the upper decades of life to drive a car. A recent study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that drivers aged 70 and older were less likely to be involved in a fatal car accident than those 35 to 54.

The study, published in June in the Journal of Safety Research, recorded a 43 percent drop in fatal accidents

among drivers 70 and older from 1997 to 2018. For middle-aged drivers, the decline in fatal accidents was half that, 21 percent. Although seniors rarely drove as far as younger drivers did, older adults had better safety records per mile driven. In 2017, for the first time ever, drivers 70 and older had fewer crashes reported to the police than middle-aged drivers, the institute found.

Older adults benefit from years of driving experience that usually translates into better risk assessment and the ability to navigate challenges. Compared to young drivers, they are less likely to drink and drive, speed, ignore road signs, drive in bad weather and drive at night.

The study's authors credited two major factors for the improved safety record of older drivers: seniors today are healthier than in decades past, and most are operating safer vehicles. To that, I would add, they're helped by significant safety improvements in roadway design, including better signage and traffic patterns. For example, the insurance institute reported, when stop signs or traffic signals were replaced by roundabouts at intersections, overall crashes dropped 37 percent, injury crashes by 75 percent, and fatalities by 90 percent.

Still, there's no question that an aging mind and body can compromise driving safety. Dexterity, flexibility and reaction time necessarily decline as we get older. Age-related health challenges that can impair driving ability

include arthritis, glaucoma, macular degeneration, glare sensitivity, hearing loss, cognitive decline and dementia.

The most important lesson for drivers in the upper echelons of life is to acknowledge such changes, know how to compensate for them if possible, and prepare for when it's time to retire from driving.

“On average, men have to stop driving five or six years before they die, and for women it's 10 years,” said Dr. Louise Aronson, a geriatrician at the University of California, San Francisco. “It helps to recognize that things are going to change, and think in advance about how you can best remain in control of your life. It's a lot better to have plans in place than to have your world suddenly ripped out from under you.”

And before family members take the keys from an older relative, they should recognize the adverse consequences of “driving retirement,” Dr. Aronson wrote in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in an essay aptly titled, “Don't Ruin My Life — Aging and Driving in the 21st Century.” Negative effects include increased social isolation, depression and loneliness, all correlated with poor health and a shortened life.

When forced by advancing years or health issues to stop driving, people can lose status and self-respect as well as independence and opportunities that enhance their well-being, she pointed out.

Of course, age by itself is not a reliable determinant for when people should stop driving. People in their 90s who are physically fit and drive often can be better drivers than 70-year-olds who are out of shape and drive infrequently.

To justify continuing to drive, older people may tell others they don't go farther than the grocery store, they stay off the highway or they don't drive at night. But such comments can be a red flag that it's time to stop driving altogether, Dr. Aronson said. Competent driving is a skill that requires practice to maintain — “the less you drive, the less good you are at it,” she said. “Use it or lose it.”

Brenda Vrkljan, a rehabilitation specialist at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, is doing what she can to help older adults continue to drive safely by monitoring where and when they drive and how they behave behind the wheel.

“Older drivers are, all in all, very good drivers,” she told me. “But driving is not a right. It's a privilege we have to earn; we need to be aware that things change as we get older and we don't necessarily have the same skills. Driving involves complex maneuvers, and most people outlive their driving ability.”

A program called Candrive, which Dr. Vrkljan helped establish, is tracking the driving patterns of older adults to assess what changes might enhance safety. In an ongoing study, she and colleagues are placing cameras in aging

drivers' cars to record their unsafe missteps, like failing to check mirrors before changing lanes, not stopping soon enough or fumbling with a coffee cup. Afterward, the drivers can view the video, offering them an opportunity to bear witness to their limitations.

In Ontario, drivers over 80 have to renew their license every two years, after taking a vision test, a 45-minute refresher course on traffic laws, an assessment of their mental acuity and a review of their driving record. New York, on the other hand, has no specific age-based rules for older drivers, who need only pass a vision test every eight years to renew their license.

Steps to help the older driver

- Periodically take a refresher course. AAA and AARP, among others, offer courses on defensive driving. Or, go out with a driving instructor who can highlight your safety limitations.
- Get your eyesight checked annually, or more often if you have a disorder that can impair vision. Check your hearing, too, and get hearing aids if it's significantly diminished. Cognitive deficits should also be monitored.
- Maintain — or restore — your physical fitness, including by doing exercises to improve strength and flexibility in the neck, calves and other areas.

- Get the safest car you can afford. Most new cars are equipped with a variety of bells and whistles, like backup cameras and lane departure warnings, that help to compensate for age-related deficits.
- Create an advance driving directive. If you can't decide to stop driving, assign someone who will make the decision for you. And establish plans for how to get services, groceries and wherever you may want to go when you can no longer drive.