

The Next Chapter

What happens when you or your parents can no longer drive?

If you or someone you know is facing the prospect of losing the ability to drive, you know how much emotion can be packed into this simple question. To some, giving up driving is a life-changing experience; however, many report that it isn't as bad as they feared. In fact, life without a car can offer many positive changes and open new opportunities.

For many of us, cars are much more than a way to get from point A to point B—they give us freedom and independence and are even a form of self-expression. We polish our cars, pose in pictures with them, and continually pour money into them.

It doesn't help if someone tells you that it is “no big deal” when you no longer can drive, because it is a big deal. Thanks to a recent research study (1), we now understand that one's car and the personal needs it helps address are more important to seniors than even seniors themselves may consciously realize.

Why is it so hard for seniors to give up their cars?

British researchers Dr. Charles Musselwhite and Hebba Haddad observed that “reduced mobility (for example, losing one's ability to drive a car) can have serious consequences for mental well-being and is a major cause of depression [in older people].”

Being able to drive and owning a car obviously helps meet certain needs. Through focus groups and interviews with seniors 68 to 90 years old, this study determined that these needs fall into three distinct categories:

- 1. Practical needs** – Enables access to groceries, medical services, and other necessities in a safe, comfortable, and reliable way.
- 2. Social needs** – Access to social activities (lunch, book club, golf) with friends and family as well as supporting the need for social interaction, personal independence, control, and maintaining status in the community.
- 3. Aesthetic needs** – Travel for its own sake: ability to hop in the car to “get away,” see new scenery, or simply enjoy the physical experience and relaxation that driving itself offers many people.

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The research was especially valuable in its discovery that driving offers much more than easy access to tangible essentials. Seniors who are unable to drive themselves to events or are no longer able to take spontaneous “Sunday drives” into the country are at risk of losing other, less-obvious social benefits, which are equally important to their lives.

Common causes of impaired driving safety.

While it is important to consider a person’s pride and sense of independence when questioning driving abilities, these questions usually arise due to safety concerns. Diminished driving abilities can pose potentially life-threatening risks to the driver, other drivers, passengers, and pedestrians.

According to an article in *The Johns Hopkins Medical Letter* (2) and other sources, age-related conditions can diminish an older person’s ability to drive. Some of the most common are:

- **Impaired vision** – reduced peripheral and night vision and inability to clearly read traffic signs
- **Impaired hearing** – cannot hear emergency vehicles, honking, other aural driving cues
- **Loss of physical strength and flexibility** – tires easily and cannot turn to look over the shoulder
- **Slower mental process** – alert, slower reaction times, dementia (see below)
- **Specific medical conditions** – cataracts, glaucoma, acute arthritis, increased risk of heart attack, stroke, vertigo
- **Side effects of medications** – many prescriptions include a caution against operating a vehicle

How do you know if it’s time to hang up the keys?

Self-Evaluations.

Since the physical causes of impaired driving often come on gradually, it can be easy to overlook warning signs. Increased self-awareness is the first and best line of defense.

Johns Hopkins and other sources cite numerous signs to take note of that may indicate that it’s time for a decision to be made. Some of these signs include stopping in traffic for no reason, drifting into other lanes, getting lost on a familiar route, difficulty seeing pedestrians or other vehicles, lacking good judgment, and minor accidents or near-misses.

Clinical Assessments.

If a more professional approach is desired, physicians and many organizations offer free information and programs to evaluate drivers. While many assessment programs charge a fee, Medicare may cover some or all of it. (Some resources are listed at the bottom of this article.)

If there is reason to believe dementia is involved.

Early in 2010, the American Academy of Neurology released new guidelines to help determine when people with dementia should stop driving (3). Since family and caregivers are often the first line of defense when it comes to noticing unsafe driving in a person with dementia, they will want to consult early on with a physician who can help evaluate the patient’s driving and offer guidance.

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For more information on dementia and driving, The Hartford offers their guidebook, *At the Crossroads: Family Conversations about Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia and Driving*.
<http://www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers/helpbeyond/dementiadriving.htm>

Will you make the decision to stop driving, or will someone make it for you?

The decision to stop driving is often made by someone else rather than the driver, which can come from pressure by family and friends, after a specific incident, or from a medical professional.

If you pay close attention to your body, you will know when it's time to give up driving. Seniors who have gone through this process will tell you that it is better to decide on your own rather than to have someone else "force" you into it. When you make the decision, *you* retain *your* personal control and dignity.

Things you can do to increase driving safety:

- **Get tested.** Have an impartial third party observe and evaluate your driving.
- **Take a driver improvement and safety course.** AARP and others offer courses.
- **Exercise.** A regular exercise program can help strengthen your mind and body.
- **Identify your own high-risk driving conditions and avoid them.** For example, you may want to avoid driving at night, during bad weather or rush hour, while medicated, or taking routes that are unfamiliar to you.

Tap into all of the great resources available to you.

Today, whether you are an older driver or a concerned loved one, there are many resources available with information and practical guidance on this topic. Physicians, family, and friends as well as national organizations are all good resources. Listed below are just three of the many reputable organizations:

The American Association of Retired People (AARP)

Warning Signs:

aarp.org/home-garden/transportation/info-05-2010/Warning_Signs_Stopping.html

Classroom and online Driver Safety Program as well as articles and videos on having a conversation with a loved one about his/her driving:

aarp.org/home-garden/transportation/ds_program

The Hartford

Visit The Hartford for more tips, discussions, driver assessments, and worksheets:
thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers

This site also offers a valuable list of free publications to order or download:
thehartford.com/mature-market-excellence

The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. (AOTA)

For articles that help guide caretakers and assess the older driver, visit AOTA online: aota.org/Practice/Productive-Aging/Driving.aspx

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Focus on meeting your personal needs rather than dwelling on your car.

While giving up your car can be difficult, there are alternative ways to fulfill the same basic needs that a car satisfied while still maintaining a high quality of life.

The practical necessities are the easiest to satisfy. Because getting food and going to doctor appointments are understood by everyone to be essential to your well-being, family and friends often will make sure you have access to those things. When that's not an option, most cities offer services, such as mass or special transportation or low-cost delivery services. Check with your local human resources agency or ask your physician for suggestions.

Senior programs often offer social events, including travel activities with transportation to and from them. You may find that traveling with a friendly group is more fun and stress-free than driving by yourself.

A full-service retirement community (like Touchmark) will provide comfortable, convenient transportation for residents that can support your personal needs. The need to travel away from home is also greatly reduced if the community provides dining, health care, and social activities on-site.

Embrace the freedom and joy of not being tied to a car.

Giving up your car is not synonymous with giving up life as you know it. The money you save from not buying and maintaining a car—insurance, gas, washing, etc.—will go a long way toward helping you buy public or private transportation that is safe, reliable, and convenient.

Many seniors report how relaxing it is to let someone else do the driving. No more looking for parking spaces or cleaning off the car in poor weather. No more wondering what that strange noise is coming from under the hood or unexpected repair costs.

What will you do if you can no longer drive? If you are open to new ideas, you are bound to discover alternatives that are at the least just as relaxing and enjoyable—maybe even more so.

(1) "Prolonging Safe Driver Behaviour Through Technology: Attitudes of Older Drivers,"

Musselwhite, C., Haddad, H. 2010.

http://www.sparc.ac.uk/media/downloads/executivesummaries/exec_summary_musselwhite.pdf

"Mobility & Older Adults' Quality of Life" by Richard Shank, May 25, 2010. *Aging in Action*, <http://aginginaction.com/2010/05/mobility-older-adults%e2%80%99-quality-of-life/>

(2) "Evaluating the Aging Driver," *The John Hopkins Medical Letter*, August 2010, pg. 3.

For more information on when or how to approach the topic with an individual who has a dementia illness, contact the Family Caregiver Alliance at 800-445-8186 or www.caregiver.org.

(3) An evidence-based clinical guideline published by the American Academy of Neurology in the April 20, 2010 edition of the journal *Neurology*[®] suggests that physicians should consider multiple information sources to evaluate driving safety for those with dementia, including observers' reports of declining driving skill and driving tests. http://www.aan.com/news/?event=read&article_id=8777