

“Driving Miss Daisy” is not like Driving Yourself

Life is full of inevitable events – and, if you are fortunate enough to keep on having birthdays – aging will continue to change you. Everyone ages differently and at different paces but driving your automobile competently, defensively and being alert is required of all safe drivers. A driver’s age is not the issue. In fact, teenagers have the highest accident rates; elders the second highest. Dangerous drivers are not a matter of age, too young or too old, but a matter of competence.

Many of the processes of aging can change the competence of drivers. For example:

1. **Visual Decline:** Vision declines with age, which means depth perception and judging the speed of oncoming traffic becomes more difficult. The eyes also lose the ability to process light, which makes night vision worse and creates more sensitivity to bright sunlight and glare. By age 60, most individuals need three times the amount of light that was needed at age 20 in order to drive safely at night. Range of vision also decreases as adults come to depend on eyeglasses. Bi-focals and tri-focals don’t enhance your peripheral vision.
2. **Hearing Loss:** Approximately one-third of adults over age 65 are hearing-impaired. Because hearing loss happens gradually, a senior may not realize they are missing important cues when driving, such as horns honking, emergency sirens approaching, or a child’s bicycle bell.
3. **Increased Reaction Time:** With age, flexibility may decrease as response time increases. A full range of motion is crucial on the road. In addition, chronic conditions can limit mobility (rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson’s disease, sleep apnea, heart disease, etc.).
4. **Medications:** It is common for people to take more medications as they age. Some medications, as well as certain combinations of medications, can increase driving risks.
5. **Drowsiness:** Aging can make sleeping more difficult, resulting in daytime tiredness and an increased tendency to doze during the day (or while driving). In addition, some people are drowsy after eating, some prescription drugs cause drowsiness, and warm temperatures inside the car can be the catalyst for drowsiness.
6. **Dementia or Brain Impairment:** Mental impairment or even just the beginning of dementia makes driving more dangerous, more frustrating and inhibits concentration. It may also cause delayed reactions to sudden or confusing situations on the road or make it very difficult to appropriately respond to road construction, very heavy traffic, or detours as the person is no longer familiar with their surroundings.

It is estimated that in normal driving conditions, you will have to make about seven to ten decisions per mile. These include speed adjustments, lane changes, merging traffic, reacting to traffic signals, reading road signs, monitoring your dashboard panel gauges, looking in your rearview and side mirrors, listening to sounds from the external environment and those made by your car or from people in the car, etc., etc. All of us want to continue driving as long as we can...but it is imperative that we do so safely. The following are just some of the warning signs that indicate that it might be time to assess whether or not you should continue to be an independent driver:

1. Multiple “close calls” (almost being involved in an accident)
2. More conflict on the road (other drivers honking at you, your frustration with other drivers)
3. Dents or scrapes on your car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs, etc.
4. Difficulty seeing the sides of the road when looking straight ahead
5. Having a hard time turning around to check over your shoulder while backing up or changing lanes

6. More than one traffic ticket or “warnings” by law enforcement officers in the last year or two
7. Others being reluctant to having you drive or having you take the grandchildren somewhere
8. Getting disoriented or lost
9. Difficulty staying in your lane of traffic or feeling uncomfortable switching lanes

For almost all of us, having a driver’s license, our own car and being able to continue driving is synonymous with freedom, independence, self-sufficiency, involvement in social and religious activities, being employed and having fun. Understandably, driving is not a privilege that anyone – teenager or elder – wants to relinquish willingly. As important as it is for all of us to treat the senior driver with respect and not jump to unjust conclusions or stereotypes, it is also critical that you do all that can be done to enhance your own driving skills and adjust to the changes of aging. A few of the very basic things that can be done include: getting your vision checked routinely, keeping the windshield and mirrors clean, not driving at night, not driving in adverse weather, not driving when traffic is likely to be heavy, wearing wrap-around sun glasses in bright daylight, and enrolling in one or more on-line or in person driver safety classes.

Chances are it has been a long time since you refreshed your knowledge about driving rules/ laws, road signs, signals and markings, driver safety strategies, defensive driving techniques, and understanding and using automobile safety features. One of the most respected driver safety programs is the one developed and offered via AARP at local sites. Delta College is now an approved vendor for this exceptional program and over the next several months sessions will be offered not only on their main campus but at their centers in Midland, Bay City and Saginaw. The eight hour program only costs \$12.00 for AARP members (you must show your membership card when paying at the first session) or \$14.00 for non members. If interested in enrolling in one of these sessions call the Delta College LifeLong Learning Office. The AARP Driver Safety Program is the nation’s first and largest refresher course for drivers age 50 and older and has helped millions of drivers remain safe on today’s roads. There are no tests to take and you will receive a certificate upon completion. Several Michigan insurance companies offer automobile insurance discounts if you present your certificate.

We can’t make teenage drivers older and more experienced any more than we can make you younger with better eyesight and response time. But you can take personal responsibility to improve your own driver competence!

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