



## **Handout for: Driving and Dementia**

Many seniors voluntarily limit or give up their driving when they notice the warning signs of impairment. Early dementia is not necessarily a reason to stop driving but it can be an opportunity for the senior driver, their family, and friends, to open up the conversation of safe driving. Dementia is progressive so it is important to monitor for signs that it might be time to stop driving.

### **Physical & Cognitive Changes in the Aging Driver:**

**Eyesight-** The field of vision narrows; instead of taking in the wide view you may only be able to take in what is right in front of you

**Hearing-**After age 65 1/3 of Americans have age related hearing loss. Hearing loss can affect ability to detect the high pitch siren sounds, possibly placing self or others at risk.

**Reflexes/Reaction-**Stiff or painful joints may affect range of motion such as the ability to turn to see traffic to the left or right or one's ability to physically react quickly. Medical conditions, medications, and inadequate sleep can all affect the ability to driving safety

**Processing Information-**The average driver makes about 20 decisions during each mile driven. When encountered with a potential collision, the reaction time necessary to avoid a collision is about a half of a second. Aging can affect reaction time due to the natural slowing of the brain and its ability to process new and or multi-sensory information in a rapid manner.

**Warning Bells:** Warning signs may indicate you may not be safe to drive.

- Forgetting well-known streets, getting lost even in familiar places, becoming easily confused in traffic
- Failing to observe traffic signs, and signals, hitting curbs, garage doors, mailboxes, frequent fender benders, or unexplained scrapes or dents
- Confusing the brake and gas pedals
- Failing to use the turn signal or keeping the signal on even when not changing lanes, straddling lanes, or drifting into lanes
- Driving slower than speed limit, braking or accelerating abruptly without cause
- Has been issued two or more traffic tickets in the past two years
- Difficulty reacting quickly



### **Keeping the Conversation Open:**

Remember, driving is a source of independence, one of the first sources of independence when you are growing up and one of the last sources of independence relinquished with aging. Losing the ability or right to drive is a significant loss.

Develop a plan for knowing when it is time to stop driving. Ask the senior how he or she will know when it is time to stop and remain sensitive to how difficult this may be.

Explore options for adaptive driving devices, and driver safety courses developed specifically for the senior driver.

Develop a plan of possible resources that can assist with transportation needs. Identify specific transportation needs; identify support options available such as family, friends, and community, clarify cost, availability, and safety.

If a senior driver is unsafe and is unwilling to give up driving, you, the family physician, or the police can file an unsafe driving report to your states DMV who will then evaluate the driver's impairment and impose restrictions or revoke the license. If the senior's cognitive ability impairs their ability to understand the danger, some families have resorted to taking the keys or disabling the car.

### **Transportation Options:**

Elder Care Locator: [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov) or toll free at: 1-800-677-1116 to locate your local Area Agency on Aging contact for further assistance with transportation options for seniors.

AARP: <http://states.aarp.org/tn-transport/>

The National Center on Senior Transportation resource administered by Easter Seals, Inc. and in partnership with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging and another great resource for determining transportation options for seniors. The Web site: [www.seniortransportation.net](http://www.seniortransportation.net) or toll free at 1-866-528-6278 for further assistance.

Using any search engine on the Internet, you can type in "senior driving" and a wealth of resources is available to assist you.



VA Caregiver Support Line 1-855-260-3274