



# The Older And Wiser Driver



## Sharpening Your Driving Skills

Aging is inevitable, but growing older doesn't have to mean giving up an active life. While aging does impose physical limitations, many people achieve their greatest successes later in life. For example, businessman Henry M. Leland founded the Cadillac Automobile Company when he was 59 years old. A few years later he left that company and started Lincoln Motor Company at the age of 74.

Traffic safety is vital for drivers of all ages, but older drivers experience physical changes that can affect driving ability – changes in vision, reaction time, and flexibility. While older drivers as a group do have more crashes than people in their 40s, their individual safety records differ as much as those of any group.

Here are some things all drivers should pay attention to, but which are more likely to affect older drivers.

## Vision

As everyone over 40 knows, eyes change with age, and usually not for the better. Physically, the eye's lenses lose the ability to change focus quickly, peripheral vision narrows, and the retina becomes less sensitive to light. The amount of light needed to drive roughly doubles every 13 years. A 45-year-old requires four times as much light as a 19-year-old, and a 60-year-old requires 10 times as much. Since 90 percent of decisions made while driving are based on information acquired through the eyes, good vision is crucial to safe driving.

- Get regular eye exams. The American Optometric Association recommends comprehensive eye exams every two years for persons age 60 and younger, and annually for those 61 and older. Cataracts are common and can be corrected with surgery; the progress of many other eye problems can be slowed if they are detected in time.
- If you have trouble with night vision or glare, limit driving to daytime hours.
- Turn your head frequently to compensate for diminished peripheral vision.
- Keep headlights, mirrors, and windshields clean – including the glass inside the car.
- Add a larger rearview mirror to increase the range of visibility.
- Keep your eyes up – look at the road ahead to see trouble before you reach it. In the city look at least one block ahead; on the highway look at the section of the road you'll reach in 20 to 30 seconds.





### **Cognition**

While older minds may be just as sharp as younger ones, they react more slowly. Age lengthens the time it takes the brain to process information and also makes it harder to ignore distractions. Reacting to a situation while driving involves three steps: sensing, deciding, and acting. For an older driver, each step takes longer – and possibly so long that it becomes dangerous. Here are some ways to help compensate for the natural tendency to need more time to act:

**Leave more room in front of the car.**

Allow a greater distance between you and the vehicle ahead, so you'll have plenty of time to stop.

**Avoid left turns** if you are uncomfortable making them. You can sometimes make three

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right turns to avoid having to make a left. If you must turn left, pay extra attention to the speed of the cars coming toward you. Make sure you have enough time and space to safely cross oncoming traffic before turning, and watch for pedestrians who might force you to stop before you can safely complete your turn.

**Eliminate distractions**, such as the radio or cell phone. If people in the car are distracting you, tell them they'll have a safer ride if they're quiet.

**Plan to go over your route ahead of time**, so you won't reach an intersection and have to make a last-minute decision about which way to turn.

**If freeways are confusing** or feel too fast-moving, use side roads. By the same token, if rush hour is stressful, limit your driving to slower times of day or use public transportation.

## Fitness

Driving is a physical activity, and a driver who gets no physical exercise may not have the strength, flexibility, or coordination to operate a vehicle safely. Even simply taking a brisk walk every day may help make you a safer driver.

- ★ **Stay physically fit.** Walk for at least 20 minutes five times a week or the equivalent. Gardening, golf, tennis, and other sports can also help keep you in good physical shape.
- ★ **Stay mentally active.** Using your problem-solving skills to do jigsaw puzzles, crosswords, or other non-driving activities can help keep your mind active and engaged in ways that may help you behind the wheel. Learning a new skill or hobby is fun at any age, and helps keep your mind flexible.







## Medication

Medications can interfere with driving by making the driver drowsy or distracted. This includes many over-the-counter medications, such as decongestants or cold remedies. Some of the worst offenders include tranquilizers, pain pills, sleep medicines, antidepressants, cough medicines, and antihistamines.

- ★ **Read the fine print.** If a medication you're taking is labeled "Do not use while operating heavy machinery," let someone else drive.
- ★ **Inform your doctor** about what non-prescription medication you are taking. This includes alcohol, which can interact with some drugs and cause serious side effects.
- ★ **Discuss your medication** and its effects with your doctor or pharmacist.
- ★ **Discuss with your doctor** or pharmacist your medication, its effects, and how it interacts with any other drugs you may be taking.
- ★ **If any medication** makes you feel sleepy or disoriented, don't drive.

## **When to Stop**

A driver's chronological age is not a good predictor of driving ability. What counts on the road is performance and both physical and mental fitness. Here are a few of the signs of diminished capacity for driving safely:

- Having a series of minor accidents or near crashes
- Having wandering thoughts or being unable to concentrate
- Being unable to read ordinary road signs
- Getting lost on familiar roads
- Having other drivers honk at you frequently
- Being spoken to about your driving by police, family, and friends

## **Getting Additional Help**

Many driver refresher courses are offered in local communities. These courses can update you on changes in traffic laws, signs, signals, and markings, and offer safe driving tips. Some also offer actual behind-the-wheel assessments, which can be especially helpful in sharpening your driving skills. Behind-the-wheel assessments are also offered by some physical rehabilitation specialists; these can be very important when one's driving abilities have been affected by a stroke or other serious ailment. Contact your local AAA Club to locate the class nearest you.

## **Know Your Limits**

Being a safe driver means more than avoiding crashes. It also means paying attention to road conditions and being aware of your own changing abilities. Just a few simple adjustments, such as limiting your driving to certain times or adding an extra-wide mirror, can help protect you and those around you from deadly crashes.

By adhering  
to these simple  
guidelines you, too,  
can remain an older  
and wiser driver!

And remember –  
always wear your  
safety belt!

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