

Auto

HOW TO HELP THE ELDERLY DRIVE SAFELY

What can you do when your elderly parents' driving skills fade, but they don't recognize or acknowledge it, and you fear for their safety?

It's a delicate problem. Driving represents independence for many older Americans, and withholding the car keys can flatten their self-esteem. That's particularly true when failing health and other age-related challenges already frustrate them.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that the age 70+ segment of America grew as fast as the total population in the past 10 years. People age 70+ account for about 9% of the total U.S. population, but they represent 14% of all traffic deaths.

PEMCO and NHTSA agree that older adults should be encouraged to maintain their lifestyle and activities, including driving, unless there's compelling evidence to the contrary. However, at some point, aging and declining health may hamper critical skills needed for driving.

Children, spouses, and other loved ones should watch for warning signs of fading driving abilities: poor judgment and distance perception, slow reactions, confusion, driving too fast or too slow, inability to see other cars or pedestrians clearly, near misses, and new dents and dings appearing on the car.

Loved ones are typically in the best position to intervene. You can start by appealing to the older driver's better judgment. Here are some recommended talking points.

- Share your concern and see if he or she recognizes the same problems. Don't do this while driving. Do it when there are no distractions.
- Don't speak in generalities. Offer specific examples of dangerous driving behavior you've witnessed.
- The elderly driver may be defensive. Make it a good discussion – not a lecture – by listening carefully and empathizing with his or her concerns.
- A good first step might be agreeing to drive in daylight hours only, and only in light traffic.

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- Offer to help with errands, and suggest transportation alternatives. Help devise a plan to take advantage of public transportation.
- If the elderly driver is Internet-savvy, encourage online shopping.
- Suggest taking the Senior Driver Accident Prevention Program through the Washington State Dept. of Licensing. Go to <http://www.dol.wa.gov/ds/senior.htm>
- For more-urgent concerns, see a doctor. Suggest a driving test that measures vision perception, functional ability, reaction time, and includes a behind-the-wheel evaluation. They're available in Washington through:
 - Univ. of Washington Medical Center, Seattle, Tvh@u.washington.edu
 - St. Luke's Rehabilitation Institute, Spokane, 509-473-6289
 - PROVAIL, Seattle, teresav@provail.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

AARP, www.aarp.org

American Medical Association, www.ama-assn.org

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, http://www.iihs.org/safety_facts/state_laws/older_drivers.htm

NHTSA, <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/olddrive>

