

Section 2

Functional assessment — emerging emphasis

Alert box

Medical standards for drivers often cannot be applied without considering the functional impact of the medical condition on the individual.

All Canadian jurisdictions have policies in place that allow individuals the opportunity to demonstrate that they are capable of driving safely despite the limitations implied by a diagnosis. Criteria may vary among jurisdictions.

2.1 Overview

Historically, determining medical fitness to drive was based solely on a medical office examination and a diagnosis. However, recent court decisions recognize that the ability of a driver to accommodate and function with a given medical condition varies with the individual. These court decisions have also established the right of individuals to be assessed individually for their ability to drive safely. A functional assessment, which is a structured assessment of the individual's ability to perform the actions and exercise the judgement necessary for safe driving — and often includes a road test — takes this individual variation into account. Functional assessments may be available only in urban centres and may be difficult to arrange for patients in rural areas.

A driver with a medical condition that can compromise cognitive or motor skills may require a functional assessment to determine fitness to drive. Any compromise of the ability to perform daily activities should trigger some sort of functional driving assessment.

2.2 Standards

Canadian jurisdictions are working to develop and apply standards that permit individual assessment of functional capabilities of drivers with medical conditions that may affect driving.

Medical standards for drivers must address three different types of conditions:

Functional limitations: Certain medical conditions, or combination of medical conditions,

can lead to limitations of functional capabilities (e.g., the amputation of a foot will have an impact on the ability to drive with a manual transmission).

Associated risk: The risk of a catastrophic event due to a medical condition may be judged to be unacceptable. Certain heart conditions are examples of medical conditions where the risk of an incapacitating event occurring while driving has led to the definition of criteria designed to diminish the risk.

Use of substances judged incompatible with driving: Illicit drugs, alcohol and medications may interfere with fitness to drive.

2.3 Assessment

2.3.1 Office assessment

Physicians in a medical office setting can assess their patients' fitness to drive when the patients are clearly either capable or incapable of driving. This guide provides information to assist with those decisions. In less clear-cut situations, it may be necessary for the physician to employ other means of testing to perform a functional assessment. This usually involves on-road testing.

It should be emphasized that, with the exception of temporary restrictions for short-term medical situations, the physician is not required to determine whether a licence will be granted or suspended. The physician's responsibility is to describe the situation, and the licensing agency will make a decision based on the physician's observations and its interpretation of the regulations.

2.3.2 Functional assessment

A functional assessment is appropriate when the medical condition in question is present all of the time. Functional assessment is not appropriate when the driver has a medical condition that is episodic (e.g., seizures) and known to be associated with increased risk.

Licensing authorities make their own decisions about the evidence and opinions on which to base their decision. There is a role for specialized road testing and computerized screening, as well as some self-administered tests (as long as the patient has insight). Physicians may choose to refer a patient for additional assessment when such resources are available to their patients. The decision to refer for assessment can be deferred to the licensing authority. Assessments are usually available through private companies and are paid for by the driver (see Appendix E). Some public health care facilities offer driving assessments free of charge, but access is limited and waiting lists tend to be long.

Some jurisdictions use off-road evaluations, such as driving simulators or batteries of tests to predict on-road behaviour. Computerized testing may provide useful objective information

about functions believed to be important for safe driving. However, there is insufficient evidence either to support or refute making licensing decisions based solely on their results.

Most Canadian jurisdictions have some form of formal road testing in place, often conducted by occupational therapists specialized in the functional testing of drivers. In some jurisdictions, certified technicians do the testing. Assessments are normally limited to drivers of private cars. Drivers of commercial vehicles and motorcycles usually cannot be evaluated in private centres.

Currently, there is insufficient evidence to recommend for or against any specific testing method. Authoritative research in this field demonstrates clearly that the novice driver's road test is inappropriate for experienced drivers. Ideally, the experienced driver's test should take place in surroundings familiar to the driver and, if possible, in his or her own car. Safety considerations and distance may preclude this, which makes standardized testing difficult.