

AN INSIDE VIEW

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Older Adults and Driving: What are the Issues?

Vera, age 72, started driving the day she turned 16. Except for a minor fender bender and a speeding ticket during her first few years behind the wheel, she's been accident-free all this time.

Last week, though, when driving at night, she side-swiped a parked car. There were no injuries, but the police had to be called and an Autopac claim made. The incident shook Vera up. She claimed that the glare on the wet pavement caused her to become momentarily disoriented. She admitted to her family that she'd been bothered by glare at night for the past couple of years, but had always managed to reach her destination safely. She has decided to give up driving at night for fear of hurting herself or someone else.

Vera's situation is not unique: as people age, normal changes in physical and mental health can affect the ability to drive safely. Take vision as an example. An older person's eyes have thicker lenses and smaller pupils, making them more sensitive to glare. They can't refocus as quickly as a younger person, so when they look from the dashboard to the road, it takes them a few seconds longer to clearly see what lies ahead. Depth perception declines, so an older driver may have more difficulty

judging how fast other cars are moving. As well, as people age, their retinas are less sensitive to light – they require more light than younger people to see and drive safely.

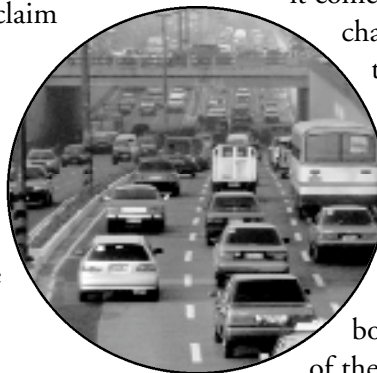
Effects of Alcohol

Alcohol consumption is another area of concern when it comes to older adults and driving. "Age associated changes make older people more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol," explains Deb Kostyk, Prevention and Education Consultant at the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba. "For example, there are changes in the way an older person's liver metabolizes alcohol – it takes less alcohol to become intoxicated."

As well, body water content declines and body fat content increases as one ages. Both of these affect blood alcohol concentration (BAC) when a person drinks. Therefore, an older person who drinks the same amount of alcohol as when they were young will have a higher BAC.

"You have to ask yourself, 'Are grandma and grandpa driving impaired?'" says Kostyk. "They may never have had a problem with alcohol before, but in the course of normal aging, alcohol will have more of an effect, and they may not even realize it."

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Effects of Medications

It is known that older people take more medications than younger people, both prescribed and over-the-counter. Just as the body's sensitivity to alcohol changes as one ages, so does its sensitivity to medications. So, an older person may experience more exaggerated effects of medications, including drowsiness or disorientation, which slow reaction times – a dangerous effect for someone who is operating a motor vehicle. Medications can also interact with one another, and with alcohol, to cause effects that negatively impact on a person's ability to drive. And here is another little known fact: using alcohol with Aspirin causes a person's BAC to rise. Many common over-the-counter drugs cause dangerous effects when combined with alcohol.

Other Changes

Other factors that may affect an older person's ability to drive safely include: reduced flexibility caused by a variety of conditions, such as arthritis; chronic pain, which could reduce a person's concentration; loss of hearing; memory loss and dementia.

What Do Statistics Show?

The fact is, many older people drive. The BCAA Traffic Safety Foundation (www.tsf-bcaa.com) reports that in Canada there are over 2.5 million licensed drivers over the age of 65. While this statistic means that many older people are maintaining their independence through driving, there is a downside: in Canada, seniors represent about 13 percent of the total population, but are involved in approximately 17 percent of road fatalities.

Canada Safety Council reports that older drivers have less than the average number of collisions on a per-person basis, but on a per-kilometer basis, a disproportionately high number of road crashes involve the over-70 age group. Researcher Michelle Porter, PhD, of the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies at University of Manitoba, explains: "The more you drive, the more

likely you are to be in a crash. Older drivers typically drive less than younger people, but they get into more accidents."

Implications for Older Drivers

What does this mean for older drivers? Should they throw away the car keys the minute their eye sight changes? Should they be medication-free before being allowed to renew their driver's licenses?

Hopefully, no jurisdiction would agree to the above draconian ideas, but road safety and the older driver is an issue that researchers and law makers are addressing. It may be that a more comprehensive approach to older adults and driving may keep them on the road longer.

Sheri Fandrey, an Education Consultant at AFM who has researched and presented seminars on the topic of older adults and driving, says that punitive assessments with a goal to take licenses away from older people are unnecessary. Instead, she promotes the opposite. "Older people should be encouraged to pursue various adaptations so they won't lose their licenses, and thus their independence," she says.

The term "adaptation" can refer to anything from installing larger side mirrors for drivers who have lost flexibility in their necks to limiting driving to certain road conditions for others. For example, an older person whose slower reflexes cause nervousness in heavy traffic could be encouraged to drive only on back streets or country roads.

Fandrey favours non-judgemental, open communication with older family members and friends when it comes to their driving abilities. "Talk about the adaptations that can be made before suggesting that a person needs to quit driving," she says.

For more information on how alcohol and medications affect older people, call the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba at 944-6200.