

# Patient-Driver Safety

A Practical Guide  
for Keeping Families  
and Roadways Safe



Dignity Health™

# How Health Can Affect Driving Ability

Driving is one of the most complex and dangerous tasks people perform on a daily basis. Motor vehicle collisions are the number one cause of death in most age groups. Common sense (and legal) precautions, such as refraining from driving while texting or intoxicated, greatly mitigate this risk. Medical conditions that can affect the safe operation of a motor vehicle include:

- Alzheimer's and related dementias or memory deficits
- Field of vision loss, low vision, cataracts, glaucoma or macular degeneration
- Neurological conditions such as stroke, brain injury or movement disorders
- Physical limitations caused by arthritis, paralysis, amputation or sensory changes
- Overall health issues such as complications of advanced diabetes or cardiac disease
- Slowed thinking skills, reaction time and decision making due to medications, poor physical condition or declining mental status
- Temporary medical conditions such as knee/hip replacements, urinary tract infections, pneumonia and some cancers

It's important to recognize early signs that a driver may be unsafe, such as:

- Having trouble with lane changes
- Having minor accidents
- Getting lost on familiar routes
- Having difficulty reading road signs
- Having other drivers honk frequently
- Being spoken to about driving by law enforcement, friends or family



## Are Older Drivers at Greater Risk?

According to the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration, senior drivers are among the safest. However, aging can result in physical and mental changes that can compromise driving ability. As medication use increases with age, drugs taken alone or in combination can also impact one's driving safety.

Older drivers are not involved in as many crashes as younger drivers, but they are also more likely to be injured or killed in collisions because they are more fragile. Early identification of age-related driving impairments is the key to protecting the health of older adults.

## The Intersection of Driver Safety and Health Care

Dignity Health promotes lifelong mobility and independence. Your health care providers are committed to offering practical guidance to accommodate the needs and functional limitations of roadway users.

At Dignity Health, the physician is held accountable for knowledge of medical conditions that may affect driving safety. Your doctor may ask about your driving fitness, and may recommend you not drive until you have medical clearance. Your physician may also recommend further testing from an occupational therapist.

## How an Occupational Therapist Can Help

The goal of occupational therapy is to promote independence and safety at all stages of life. An occupational therapist works closely with the physician and health care team to address driving fitness and safety. A physician must write a prescription order for one to see the occupational therapist, whose practices include:

- Administering standardized assessments
- Educating individuals and families with assessment results
- Developing an individualized program to improve safety through retraining, exercises and compensation strategies
- Exploring adaptive equipment
- Collaborating with rehabilitation specialists for in-depth vehicle assessments, adaptations and driver training
- Collaborating with driving schools that provide behind-the-wheel testing and instruction
- Identifying transportation alternatives to support continued mobility

## Alternative Transportation Options

We encourage people to take alternative forms of transportation to prepare for a time when they are no longer able to drive. Community mobility options include:

- Private transportation and shared rides
- Public transportation such as taxis or buses, trains and subways
- Paratransit options that assist disabled persons
- Bicycling and scooters
- Walking or running

Seniors are encouraged to start trying such options while they feel healthy. A support person can accompany or follow behind if need be. Once the patient becomes familiar with the process, anxiety diminishes significantly.





## How to Have a Conversation about Driving

This is, understandably, a delicate subject to broach. Still, personal and community safety is paramount. If you feel you should discuss the topic of driver safety with someone you love, here are some guidelines for how to go about it:

- Do not allow fear to delay your conversation
- Be patient and sincere
- Share your concern
- Suggest a plan such as a talking with the doctor, or getting an assessment from an occupational therapist who can help facilitate the conversation

## Take the Next Step

If you or someone you love seem to be suffering from decreased driving ability, ask your doctor about getting an assessment and identifying positive solutions.

If you are concerned but unable to approach someone about their driving ability, you may make a confidential report to the DMV. Call **800.777.0133** or go to **dmv.ca.gov** to obtain the Request for Driver Reexamination (form DS 699). If outside California, please refer to your state DMV website.

**Driving Improvement Courses For Seniors**

[seniordriving.aaa.com](http://seniordriving.aaa.com)

**Association of Driver Rehabilitation Specialist**

[driver-ed.org](http://driver-ed.org)

**Family Conversations with Older Drivers**

[thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers](http://thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers)

**American Occupational Therapy Association**

[aota.org/practice/productive-aging/driving](http://aota.org/practice/productive-aging/driving)