

Planning for a day when you can no longer drive

Suggested approaches to help the driver

In the beginning ...

A diagnosis of dementia does not always mean that a person is immediately incapable of driving. What matters, from both a legal and a practical point of view, is whether or not an individual is still able to drive safely.

Dementia produces a progressive and irreversible loss of mental functioning with loss of memory, limited concentration and sight problems. This affects a person's judgement and ability to drive safely. When their ability to drive safely is affected, the person with dementia will be a risk, not only to themselves, but also to others.

A visit to the doctor with follow up appointments every six to 12 months can sometimes help decide if the person is fit to drive. If there is any doubt, the doctor might refer the person to a specialized memory loss clinic for a complete assessment of driving fitness. A specialized on-road test may be required. It is the responsibility of the physician to notify the motor vehicle authorities regarding suspension of driving privileges and driving licence removal.

Warning signs that dementia may be affecting a person's driving

- **Vision.** Can they see cars coming straight at them or from the sides?
- **Hearing.** Can they hear the sound of approaching cars, car horns and sirens?
- **Reaction time.** Can they turn, stop or speed up their car quickly?
- **Problem solving.** Do they become upset and confused when more than one thing happens at the same time?

- **Coordination.** Are they confusing the gas pedal with the brake pedal? Can they coordinate fast enough to correct the error?
- **Alertness.** Are they making safe lane changes?

The caregiving journey

Each individual finds his or her own way to become reconciled to the disease. Don't compare your grief with anyone else's. Not everyone will go through the grieving process in the same way.

Questions for caregivers to ask themselves if unsure

- Do others feel uncomfortable driving with the person with dementia?
- Are others forced to drive defensively to accommodate the person with dementia's driving style?
- Is a co-pilot needed to navigate the car or to alert the person of potential hazardous events or conditions?
- Has there been evidence of loss of ability in other areas of daily living activities such as medication use, financial management (banking), cooking and shopping?

Giving up driving is not always an easy decision to make. It may leave the person with dementia with mixed emotions. On the one hand, there may be a sense of relief retiring from driving. On the other hand, the person may have feelings of loss and sadness. Some people experience anger towards health professionals and family members who have recommended they stop driving. These are normal grief reactions.

Tips and strategies to encourage someone to stop driving

- **Acknowledge** how difficult it may be for the person to stop driving. Then respond with the same short message that the doctor believes it is safer not to drive.
- **Suggest some alternatives** to driving and assist with coordination of these resources. For example, they could get a taxi to take them to the grocery store once a month or set up an account with a taxi firm and order taxis in advance.
- **Encourage them** to take charge of their new transportation arrangements – perhaps by getting details and timetables of local transport services, or opening and managing their own taxi account.
- **Point out some of the benefits** to not driving. For example, they will save money on the cost of running and maintaining a car, be less stressful, or be able to enjoy the scenery.
- **Arrange outings** which do not require the car to be driven by the person with dementia.
- **Try to avoid** rational discussion or argument about the issue.
- **A letter** from the doctor or licensing authority may help the person accept the decision.
- **If all else fails hide the keys or immobilize the car.** For example, you can disconnect the battery.
- **Consult with community resources.** Help create links for person with dementia to access other transportation options.

How to talk to the person with dementia

- Praise self-regulation when driving is modified. For example, "I'm glad that you've cut down on night driving. I would never want you to drive when you're not comfortable or feel that it's too risky."
- Ask what-if questions to encourage advance planning. For example, "What if something happened and you couldn't drive? What would you do?"

- Be honest. For example, "That was a close call yesterday. I worry about your safety on the road."
- Use "I" language when talking about concerns. For example, "I'm worried about you getting lost."
- Suggest alternative transportation. For example, "Let's take the bus so we don't have to deal with the parking downtown."
- Try to get the person with dementia to discuss the issue with the doctor. For example, "Have you asked your doctor about the effects of your new medication on your driving?"

Further information on this topic

Visit the following websites:

- The Driving and Dementia Tool Kit for Patients and Caregivers, Champlain Dementia Network. www.champlaindementia.org
- Regional Geriatric Program of Eastern Ontario www.rgpeo.com
- CanDRIVE, a Canadian interdisciplinary health-related research program dedicated to improving the safety of older drivers. www.candriv.ca
- "At the crossroads: Family conversations about Alzheimer's disease, dementia and driving." <http://hartfordauto.thehartford.com/UI/Downloads/Crossroads.pdf>

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