

# What About Driving?

Information about driving for older adults and their families

SIXTY PLUS SERVICES Aging Helpline, 404.605.3867



SIXTY PLUS SERVICES

 **Piedmont**  
HEALTHCARE

Studies suggest that older adults outlive their driving ability by eight to ten years. For adults 65 to 75 years of age, motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of injury-related deaths and the second leading cause of injury-related deaths (after falls) for adults 75 years or older.

### Warning Signs Checklist

- Difficulty in backing up
- Incorrect signaling
- Riding the brake
- Parking poorly
- Hitting curbs
- Dents, scrapes on the vehicle
- Increased agitation/anxiety while driving
- Confusion about traffic signs
- Driving too slowly
- Poor judgment about distance, particularly making left-hand turns
- Near misses
- Delayed response time
- Getting into the wrong lane
- Traffic tickets or warnings
- Not stopping for stop signs or red lights
- Getting lost on familiar routes
- Car accidents
- Confusing the gas and brake pedals
- Stopping in the middle of traffic

### Driving: Right or Privilege

Driving means independence. It's how most of us visit family and friends; it's how we get to the store; and it's how we remain connected within the community. Most people consider driving a right, but it is actually a privilege – and one that comes with a significant amount of responsibility.

To maintain a sense of freedom, and to not be a burden, many otherwise responsible older adults overlook concerns about their driving ability – often at personal and public risk. When public safety is in question, an individual's right to drive is both a personal and government responsibility.

### Taking Responsibility

Whose responsibility is it to evaluate the driving ability of an older adult and to determine whether or not that individual should continue to drive? Is it the older adult, the family, the physician, the community or the state? When it comes to driving safety, all of us need to be mindful of protecting our loved ones as well as the public's safety. But when and how do we begin?

Conversations about driving as an older adult should begin before it becomes an issue. When talking about driving concerns, remember that changes in driving – even gradual changes over an extended period of time – have social and emotional implications. According to recent studies, nearly 25 percent of older adults express feelings of sadness or depression when discussing driving limitations. Family members may also feel guilty or frustrated about the impact of altered or removed driving privileges for their loved ones, as well as for themselves.

### Is Your Loved One at Risk?

See the Warning Signs checklist in this brochure. Are any of these warning signs familiar? If so, discuss them with your doctor. In Georgia, doctors are not required to report patients they may consider unsafe drivers, but most are willing to assist in the role of educator and facilitator for change.

### Doctor Recommended Assessment Programs

As people age, their driving skills change. New medications, decreased mobility, change in

reflex/reaction time, cognitive changes and impairments in vision and/or hearing can profoundly affect how we drive.

In consultation, some doctors may recommend participation in a driver assessment program for older patients. To test a driver's skills, specially trained occupational therapists evaluate strength, range of motion, reaction time and balance. They also screen for visual acuity and perception. Road sign knowledge is tested, as well as memory, decision-making and the ability to follow directions. A physician's order is required to obtain a comprehensive driving assessment from a driver rehabilitation program. Often, physicians will rely on the feedback from a driving specialist before they know whether a patient is safe to drive. If the individual passes the in-office evaluation, the occupational therapist may conduct a road test in a specially- equipped car. This type of assessment usually has one of the following results:

- The person is found to be a competent and safe driver needing no restrictions;
- He or she is told to stop driving altogether;
- The person is told to restrict driving to a defined area and/or time of day; and/or
- A recommendation is made to participate in a physical or occupational therapy program to treat those deficits cited, e.g., reflex/reaction time and muscle strength; or, a referral is made to a specialist to assess hearing and/or vision deficits.

*Remember that a physician's prescription is needed to initiate the driving assessment.*

## **A Difficult Decision**

There are circumstances when an older driver refuses to consider alternatives to driving. Cognitive impairment may prevent an older person from comprehending the implications of continuing to drive. Strategies may be utilized to reduce or prevent an unsafe driver from getting behind the wheel. Disabling the vehicle may be necessary. Keep in mind that cognitive impairment may be a declining health issue.

The decision to limit or give up driving privileges is a difficult one to make. Supportive family and friends can help make the transition easier

to achieve. Sixty Plus Older Adult Services is here to help patients and caregivers consider these serious challenges and find ways to address the individual and family's needs. Identifying the concerns and acknowledging the need for change is the first step. Please call us at **404.605.3867** for help.

## **When Is It Time to Stop Driving?**

One of the most difficult decisions to make is deciding when one should stop driving or "taking the keys away" from a family member. First, how do you know? A quick tip may be the answer to the next question:

Would you let your children/grandchildren ride with this driver?

Other tips include a review of the Warning Signs checklist in this brochure. If the driver has checked even a few of the listed items, it is time to begin asking these questions. An evaluation by a certified driving expert is one way to determine the driver's strengths and weaknesses.

## **What do you do if the driver simply refuses to stop driving?**

When you have concerns about your family member's ability to drive safely, you **MUST** address the issue. If you have discussed your concerns, identified specific reasons and incidents that have led you to these concerns and the driver still continues to drive, you will need to intervene more directly.

Enlist the help of others. Seek out the person who may have the most influence on the driver. That person may be the spouse or an adult child. Ask the driver's family doctor to help. There may be significant medical reasons why the driver is no longer safe to drive. Perhaps there are problems with vision, timing, movement, touch or even several of these problems combined that contribute to the decline in driving ability. Perhaps there are problems with memory loss that may lead to confusion and poor judgment. When alerted to significant concerns, the doctor may "write a prescription" telling his patient that it is no longer safe for him or her to be behind the wheel.

In the state of Georgia, a physician may complete the State of Georgia Department of Motor Vehicle Safety Medical Report (DS 287) form requesting the Department of Driving Services to re-test the driver or to rescind the license. The form allows the physician to state whether or not he or she has determined that the problem is temporary or permanent, and to explain why. Physicians may find the form online at [www.dds.ga.gov/docs/forms/DS-287.pdf](http://www.dds.ga.gov/docs/forms/DS-287.pdf) or by contacting the Sixty Plus Office. The Department of Driving Services (DDS) will then send a letter to the driver either requesting that they

come in for another driving examination or that their license has been revoked. The driver has thirty (30) days to respond. You may also send a letter to DDS alerting them to your concerns. In your letter you will need to offer specific examples. The DDS will then send a letter to the driver requesting that he or she see their doctor, have the doctor complete a physician's report to DDS and return it within the next 30 days. If this is not done, the driver's license will be revoked. An example of a letter you may send to the DDS is below:

**Date**

**Department of Driver Services  
P.O. Box 80447  
Conyers, Georgia 30013**

**Dear Sir:**

**I am writing this letter to express my concerns about the driving ability of \_\_\_\_\_.**

**I have witnessed the following situations that have led to my concerns. (List those experiences here.)**

- 1.**
- 2.**
- 3.**

**In addition, my family member/neighbor/friend had an accident on (date here) in which he/she was ticketed. Or: In addition, my family member/neighbor/friend has received a ticket (s) for \_\_\_\_\_.**

**I am no longer comfortable riding with this driver and I have concerns for the safety of this driver and others on the road. I am requesting that my family member/neighbor/friend be re-tested to determine his/her current driving ability.**

**Thank you for your attention to this matter.**

**Sincerely,**

**Sign your name and provide an address**



## **SIXTY PLUS SERVICES**

**Piedmont Atlanta: 404.605.3867**

**Piedmont Fayette: 770.719.7214**

**Piedmont Newnan: 770.400.2010**

**Piedmont Mountainside: 706.299.5059**

**[piedmont.org/sixtyplus](http://piedmont.org/sixtyplus)**