

Driving Options as We Age

By Kate McCarthy

Nearly 50 years ago Baby boomers were dancing to the sounds of the Beach Boys singing about a little old lady from Pasadena racing around town in her shiny red hot rod. Now those same people are facing some challenging decisions about their own ability to drive.

There are over 33 million older drivers in the USA and within 15 years that number will double. Older drivers have a higher risk factor of being involved in traffic accidents. In fact, over 500 elderly drivers are injured and 15 are killed in car crashes daily. Most accidents are due to poor judgment in timing, most often while turning left, drifting within traffic lanes and a decreased ability to respond to sudden changes on the road.

There is no set age that mandates when an older driver should hang up their keys. Safety and performance on the road are far more important than a person's date of birth and there are many things mature drivers can do to increase safety, decrease risks and remain on the road longer.

- Be proactive about health – Annual vision and hearing checks are very important. Plus know if current medications affect driving abilities.
- Drive defensively – Avoid using distracting cell phones in the car and take extra steps to watch out for the other guy. Also leave adequate space from other drivers, pay extra attention at intersections, allow enough time for braking and drive at an appropriate speed for the flow of traffic.
- Use new technology - Crash warning systems alert the driver of an impending accident or will automatically apply the brakes if necessary. New parking features hands-free parallel parking. Night vision systems used infrared to mark people and objects on the road in the dark. These new technological breakthroughs help older drivers stay behind the wheel longer. In addition, simple tricks like turning up the brightness on the gauges, adding a strap over the door to help getting in and out of the car, and keeping the headlights, mirrors and windscreen clean can all make a substantial difference in driving safety for mature drivers.
- Set limits – Many older drivers voluntarily make changes in their driving practices such as driving only during the day, staying off high speed roads or avoiding driving in bad weather. Adopting “a better safe than sorry” attitude can prevent serious problems.

Unfortunately, retaining the ability and the privilege to drive is not something that lasts a lifetime. There are some signs to look for which indicate it may be time to seek alternative transportation.

- Physical Issues – Sensitivity to light, difficulties seeing in the dark and blurred vision are all significant hindrances to driving. Also inability to hear sirens, horns or another driver accelerating nearby could mean a mature driver is missing important clues necessary for safe driving.

- Reflex and Range of Motion Issues – Generally older drivers are less able to judge distances and speed and may become confused in situations requiring quick reflex responses. Also inability to turn to look quickly can cause problems on the road.
- Memory Issues – Losing one’s way happens to everyone one, but a pattern of being lost on once familiar roads means it may be time to consider finding alternative means of transport.
- Close Call Issues – Dents and scrapes on the car, frequent near misses and an increase in traffic tickets or warnings from the police are all signs that continued driving is risky.
- On the Road Issues – The basics of driving like lane changes, braking, accelerating and use of turn signals which were once second nature become increasingly difficult with age and can be a signal it is time to get off the road.

Hanging up the car keys does not necessarily mean loss of independence. There are alternative means of getting around available for seniors. Family and friends are usually willing to lend a hand. In addition there are some transportation programs in the Fox Cities that cater to the needs of the elderly.

- Making a Ride Happen serves seniors in Outagamie, Winnebago and Calumet Counties. A team of volunteer drivers provide transport throughout the Fox Cities area for a suggested price of \$3.60 one way or \$8.00 round trip. Availability is limited. Call (920) 225-1719 to learn more.
- Neenah-Menasha Dial-a-Ride serves seniors living in the city limits of Neenah and Menasha. Dial-a-Ride tickets allow seniors to use Fox Valley Cabs for \$3.50 one way. Some limitations apply. Call (920) 886-6125 or (920) 720-7106 for more information.
- Fox Valley Transit II provides transportation for seniors in Outagamie, Calumet Counties. Advanced scheduling and some limitations apply. Call (920) 832-5789 to hear more details.
- Home care agencies – Most home health care agencies offer driving services which increase the independence of seniors by providing transportation for appointments, outings and trips. In addition to door to door service, most agency drivers will escort the passenger, assist with walkers or wheelchairs, and devote full a day to accommodate a passenger with a list of errands.



Kate McCarthy is Director of Operations for HomeAid Health Care which provides non-medical home services for the elderly who wish to remain safe and independent at home. HomeAid is a sister company to Prairie Home Assisted Living which has served the physical, spiritual, mental and health needs of their residents since 1999. Together the two companies provide comprehensive care that meets the needs of the elderly in the Fox Valley.