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Driving risks increase with age

We live in a very mobile society, not only in terms of where we live and where we vacation, but also in our day to day lives. As we age, we don't give a second thought to continuing to get into the car to drive to the mall, out to a restaurant, to church, to physician appointments, and a multitude of other daily activities. However, studies have shown that drivers over the age of 65 years are almost twice as likely to die in car crashes as drivers who are ages 55 to 64 years. This risk increases exponentially with age, with drivers over 75 years being 2.59 times more likely to die in a traffic accident and drivers 85 and older are 3.72 times at risk of death in a car accident. Older drivers are second only to teens in the likelihood of injury or death in car crashes. Moreover, by 2030, one in five Americans will be 65 years old or older.

Age alone does not make one an instantly bad driver. However, some normal changes occur with age which affect driving skills. Muscles weaken and joints become stiff, affecting one's ability to quickly turn the wheel, look back or to the side, or brake safely. Our vision changes, resulting in narrower peripheral vision, decreased ability to focus or recover from glare, requiring more light to see the same objects, and limiting ability to perceive color, especially red. Reflexes become slower, affecting reaction time. Attention spans often shorten, making it more difficult to do two things at once, or resulting in slower processing of information. Medication may affect driving ability in subtle ways.

Do these facts and statistics translate into forcing older drivers to hand over the car keys immediately? Although this extreme measure is not necessary in most cases, it still is a very real responsibility of older drivers, and those who care about them, to regularly assess the older driver's skills. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (www.aaafoundation.org) publishes helpful written materials for drivers and their families. Refresher courses (successful completion of which may reduce insurance premiums) are available through your local AAA office. AARP (www.aarp.org/drive) also provides information on safety and assessment for older drivers.

Older drivers can benefit from some simple smart driving tips. These include compensating for the effects of age on one's body. Regular eye exams are extremely important. Changes in vision are often gradual and not easily detected. Drive only during daylight hours and during lower traffic volume periods if your vision is declining. Turn your head frequently to compensate for decreased peripheral vision, and keep your eyes up and scanning for trouble. Keep windows (including the inside) clean. All mirrors and headlights should be cleaned regularly. A larger rear view mirror improves visibility. Buy a car with safety features and power options that make driving easier.

Driving is a physical activity, therefore regular physical exercise improves the strength, coordination and flexibility needed to drive a vehicle safely. Walk for at least 20 minutes five times a week, or substitute equivalent cardiovascular exercise. Stay mentally active to maintain mental flexibility, such as regular activities involving puzzle solving. Leave more room in front of your car when stopping and avoid driving in bad weather. Avoid distractions while driving such as cell phone use, the car radio or conversations with passengers. Plan your trips so as to avoid risks like left turns and ramps, and so you are sure of your route, eliminating last minute decision making. Don't drive if stressed or tired. And always wear your safety belt!

Safe driving for older adults is a significant public safety issue for us all. Growing older will happen (or has happened) to all of us, but it does not mean giving up an active life. The responsibility for traffic safety lies in the hands of the drivers who can easily prevent a tragedy by acting responsibly.