

Tips for Driving After Age 60



Leisure

Although we can get around by bike, bus, train or sidewalk, most Americans rely on their car when it comes to getting from one place to another. Driving is a key to independence.

As you get older, you should be able to continue to drive. A person's ability to drive isn't based on age alone. Age-related changes in vision, physical fitness and reflexes, however, may be reasons to reevaluate your abilities behind the wheel.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), if any of the following have occurred to you, you may have a problem that affects your driving:

- A friend or family member has expressed concern about your driving ability
- You have become lost while driving on familiar routes
- You have been warned by a police officer about poor driving behavior, even if you did not receive a ticket
- You have had several moving violations, near misses or actual crashes in the last three years

Vision and Hearing

Among the most common age-related changes that can affect your driving is vision. As people age, they may experience a reduction in their field of vision. Additionally, it becomes more difficult for eyes to adjust and focus on different objects. This problem is intensified at night, particularly when trying to recover from the glare of headlights.

Here are several symptoms of declining vision, according to the NHTSA:

- You have problems reading highway or street signs or recognizing someone you know across the street
- You have trouble seeing lane lines and other pavement markings, curbs, medians, other vehicles and pedestrians, particularly at dawn, dusk and at night
- You experience more discomfort at night from the glare of oncoming headlights

If you have any of these symptoms, see your eye doctor. Even without these symptoms, you should see your eye doctor once a year for a routine eye exam. In addition:

- Make sure you wear your glasses
- Check that your headlights are correctly aimed
- Sit high enough in your seat so that you can see at least 10 feet in front of your car
- If your vision is deteriorating, don't drive at night or in bad weather

Another common age-related change that can affect your driving is your hearing. About 20 percent of people age 55 and 30 percent of those older than 65 have impaired hearing, according to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Good hearing allows drivers to hear sirens and horns warning of danger, as well as the ability to know what is happening around them.

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Physical Fitness

As you age, it may become more difficult to control a car because of a decrease in muscle strength, coordination and flexibility. Arthritis or physical pain can also limit driving abilities, such as being able to fully turn your head to look for traffic or operate a car with manual transmission.

Here are symptoms of decreased physical fitness, according to the NHTSA:

- You have trouble looking over your shoulder to change lanes, or you have difficulty looking left and right to check traffic at intersections
- You have trouble moving your foot from the gas to the brake pedal or turning the steering wheel
- You have fallen at least once in the last year; this doesn't count trips or stumbles
- You walk less than a block a day
- You can't raise your arms above your shoulders
- You feel pain in your knees, legs or ankles when going up or down a flight of 10 stairs

If you have any of these symptoms, get a physical exam and advice from your health care provider about a stretching and walking program for fitness. Get a car with an automatic transmission. Limit sounds and distractions inside the vehicle. Sit at least 10 inches from the steering wheel to decrease chances of injury from your air bag. Always wear your seat belt.

Decreased Reaction Time and Attention

Driving requires dividing your attention among many activities and being able to react quickly. Reaction time decreases with age. Though it may not be obvious in other activities, a delay in response time can be quite noticeable during unexpected driving situations.

A decline in vision and hearing reduces the information that a person needs to respond or react to the environment with speed and good judgment that traffic often requires.

Symptoms of decreased reaction time and attention, according to the NHTSA:

- You feel overwhelmed by all the signs, signals, road markings, pedestrians and vehicles at intersections

- Gaps in traffic are harder to judge, making it more difficult to turn left at intersections or to merge with traffic when turning right
- You take medications that make you sleepy
- You often get lost or become confused
- You experience dizziness, seizures or loss of consciousness
- You are slow to see cars coming out of driveways and side streets or to realize that another car has slowed or stopped ahead of you

If you have these symptoms, you might try to limit your driving to familiar routes. Drive only during the day and avoid rush hour and heavily traveled routes, according to the NHTSA. Turn left at intersections that have a green arrow for left turns, or make several right turns to avoid turning left.

On the Road

Here are some precautions to take once you're behind the wheel.

- **Follow the laws of the road.** Stay in your lane and try to drive at the speed of traffic. Don't go too slow or too fast.
- **Buckle up.** Fasten your seat belt and insist that your passengers do the same. Wearing your seat belt can protect you in a crash.
- **Concentrate on your driving.** Keep the radio volume low and don't smoke, eat, drink or use a cellular phone. When talking to passengers, keep your eyes on the road.
- **Watch for other cars.** Glance at your mirrors often and always look behind you when reversing or changing lanes.
- **Turn with caution.** Always use your turn signal and don't rush. Make turns only when you have a clear view of oncoming traffic and are sure you can turn safely. Then turn as slowly as necessary to stay in your lane. If possible, consider changing your route to avoid difficult turns.
- **Know your limits.** Try to avoid driving situations that make you uncomfortable. For example, if night driving becomes difficult, don't drive at night. Or, if you do not like driving fast, driving in a lot of traffic, or driving in bad weather, plan ahead to avoid these situations.
- **Brush up on your skills.** AARP's Driver Safety Program is a refresher course for drivers age 50 and older.

