

St. Louis Chapter

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driving & dementia



Driving and Dementia

When a person is diagnosed with dementia, the individual and family members struggle with challenges from medical care to financial and legal matters. Of all of these concerns, driving is a common and difficult area to address.

Persons with Alzheimer's will eventually be unable to drive a car. Changes in perception, reaction time, impaired judgement, along with memory loss may work together to make driving hazardous.

A diagnosis of Alzheimer's, however, doesn't mean the person has lost the ability to drive. Potential safety considerations should be weighed against the need for independence and autonomy. It's a difficult situation and one that must be individualized for each person, based on dementia severity and the presence of driving impairment.



Persons with early stage Alzheimer's are encouraged to discuss this issue with their loved ones, before driving becomes a major concern. They should consider making an agreement with their family to give up driving at a certain point. People with early stage Alzheimer's should also work with their friends and family to create a transportation plan that meets their needs.

Warning Signs

Alzheimer's, on its own, is not a sufficient reason to terminate driving privileges. Persons are now being diagnosed in the very early stages when only short-term memory is affected. Instead, the main factor in withdrawing driving privileges should be person's driving ability.

Warning signs of problems include:

- Incorrect signaling
- Trouble navigating turns
- Moving into a wrong lane
- Confusion at exits
- Driving at inappropriate speeds
- Increased agitation or irritation while driving
- Getting lost in familiar places
- Scrapes or dents on the car, garage, or mailbox
- Near misses, accidents
- Not scanning for other cars in traffic

Transitioning from Driver to Passenger

Persons with early stage dementia should realize there may come a time when they can't make the best decisions for the safety of others and themselves. Planning and communication are important. To prepare for these discussions, imagine what it would be like if you had to stop driving. Driving represents independence, and its loss can be difficult to accept.

Encourage the person to voluntarily stop driving:

- Drive, or arrange for someone to provide transportation
- Reassure the person they will be able to reach their routine destinations
- Offer alternative forms of transportation

Solicit the support of others

- A driving rehabilitation specialist can assist with a driving assessment. These individuals (often occupational therapists) are often based at hospitals or rehabilitation centers, and have expertise in on-the-road testing.

- Ask the physician to speak with the individual and issue a prescription requiring the person to quit driving.
- Care managers, lawyers, and financial planners can also discuss their concerns about safety.



The best course of action for caregivers is to communicate openly and frequently with their loved ones, and seek assistance from professionals. If the person with dementia still insists on driving even if he or she poses a hazard, there are several additional options to consider.

- Control access to the car keys
- Replace the keys with a set that won't start the car, or file down the ignition key
- Removing the car's distributor cap or battery
- Park the car on another block or in a neighbor's driveway
- Submit a report to the Missouri Drivers License Bureau for an evaluation of the person's driving skill.

Help from the Drivers License Bureau

After taking the above steps, if you still have concerns, you can contact the Drivers License Bureau. Under the law, family members or health professionals can now submit a confidential report requesting an evaluation of a driver. To file a report, use the Driver Condition Report (form DOR-4319) which is available online from the Missouri Department of Revenue, or from the Alzheimer's Association.