

Driving & Dementia: Is it Safe?



alzheimer's association®

California Central Coast Chapter

Santa Barbara County
1528 Chapala St., #204
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Tel: 805.892.4259

120 E. Jones St, #113
Santa Maria, CA 93454
Tel: 805.636.6432

San Luis Obispo County
71 Zaca Ln Suite 110
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
Tel: 805.547.3830

Ventura County
2580 E. Main St Suite 201
Ventura, CA 93003
Tel: 805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:
800.272.3900

alz.org/CaCentral

When a diagnosis of dementia is made, it will inevitably bring up concerns about driving. Most of us tie our sense of independence into our ability to get where we need to be by ourselves, and for most of us, this is our ability to drive there.

For an individual being faced with a diagnosis of dementia, the thought of not being able to drive and needing to rely on others for transportation can be overwhelming. It signifies much more than just being able to operate a vehicle. It is a benchmark in the aging process and makes apparent the need for help and dependence on others.

So while it is important that the topic of driving be approached with sensitivity and understanding, it is vital that it be addressed.

Early in dementia, driving can become a safety issue

for some individuals. Driving is a very complex activity, requiring quick thinking, instant reactions, timing, coordination, and even good perception. However, some or all of these areas of cognition can be compromised or affected when someone has dementia.

Some studies have shown that poor driving performance increases with increased dementia severity, but this does not mean that persons with dementia or Alzheimer's disease are unsafe drivers simply because of a diagnosis. A driving assessment that includes both a written and a behind the wheel test, can help in determining if someone is safe to be driving.

Physicians are required under California law to report a diagnosis of dementia to the Public Health Department, who then will report to the DMV. The DMV will also accept reports of dementia from law enforcement agencies and relatives of the driver. This form can be obtained from our office, or from www.dmv.ca.gov. Search for "Report Unsafe Driver." The DMV will

maintain confidentiality as to who made the report if requested.

If the report comes from anywhere besides the physician, the DMV will request a Driver Medical Evaluation to be completed by the physician. If the driver fails to submit the requested medical information, driving privileges are suspended.

The classification of the severity of dementia as reported by the doctor determines the action taken by the DMV. A medical diagnosis of mild dementia will warrant a reexamination of the individual. However, a diagnosis of moderate or severe dementia will result in immediate license revocation. Only drivers with dementia in the mild stage may still have the ability to safely operate a vehicle.

In San Luis Obispo County, some doctors recommend that the individual with dementia have an independent driving assessment. The Central Coast Drivers' Safety Evaluation, owned and operated by David

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Caregiver Tips

Preventing Driving When it is Unsafe

💡 Remember, you may need to be firm in your efforts to prevent driving if it is unsafe, or if your loved one wants to drive regardless of having a license or not.

💡 Control access to the car keys — take the keys away from the individual. Some families have fake keys created to provide a sense of comfort to the person.

💡 Have the car “go into the shop for repairs.” Tell your loved one the part is on order, or it’s still being worked on.

💡 Transition driving responsibilities to others. Eliminate their driving by always jumping up and grabbing the keys first to drive.

💡 Offer alternative means of getting places for the individual. Make a plan of the person’s normal activities and try to find alternative transportation solutions.

💡 Have a higher authority to blame for them not being allowed to drive, like the doctor, the DMV, the insurance, the repair shop. Get the doctor to write “No driving” on a prescription pad.

💡 Sell the car, or donate it to a charity. (Cars 4 Causes)

💡 Validate their desire to drive — sympathize with the emotions, but remain firm in the decision.

Continued from page 1:

Jeffery, is a program designed to provide clinical and behind the wheel testing to determine a person’s potential for returning to independent and safe driving. David is an Occupational Therapist and can help families by providing an objective and realistic assessment.

If the person with mild dementia passes the DMV testing, family and friends should still be on the lookout for deteriorating driving skills as most forms of dementia are progressive. However, it is important for family members and caregivers to assess the driving skills of the person with dementia, prior to jumping to conclusions.

Try to create opportunities to observe the individual when driving. Often family members will jump in the driver seat when going somewhere with the other person. Allow them to drive and you be the passenger. Pay attention to specific examples of unsafe driving and note how safe you feel as the passenger.

Specific signs to look for include: forgetting how to locate familiar places, failing to observe traffic signs, making slow or poor traffic decisions, driving at an inappropriate speed, becoming angry or confused while driving, unexplained dents or dings on the car, near misses, and delayed response to unexpected situations.

The person with dementia may or may not recognize the changes in their own cognition and sensory skills that can impair their driving. If the person doesn’t see the safety risk, it can present a difficult situation for family members trying to balance safety and their independence. Talk with the person with dementia openly about your concerns, and seek additional support and advice from a third party, like a doctor, occupational therapist, friend, or other family member to help have the conversation.

Often times, if these conversations occur early on and continue, the actual choice of stopping driving can still be in the control of the person with dementia, and family members do not have to stop driving by force.

Written by Jessica Mezzapesa, Care Consultant, San Luis Obispo Regional Office



For more information on Driving you can order or download for free:

At the Crossroads, a Guide to Alzheimer’s Disease, Dementia and Driving at
<http://hartfordauto.thehartford.com/Safe-Driving/Car-Safety/Older-Driver-Safety/Dementia-Activity/>

For additional information like the Alzheimer’s Association Driving Fact Sheet, please contact your local office. Central Coast Drivers’ Safety Evaluation also provides informational brochures available by contacting their offices at (805) 541-5543.

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