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Would You Drive with Me Behind the Wheel?

By Marcy Maler, Program Manager

People with mild dementia are at a much greater risk of unsafe driving compared to people of the same age without dementia. The American Academy of Neurology recommends that people with mild dementia strongly consider discontinuing driving. It is important for family members and caregivers to assess the driving skills of the person with dementia and **regular** assessments during office visits may help the doctor identify a decline in abilities that indicate a greater risk. The doctor may ask for feedback from the person with dementia and a caregiver separately to assess risk. If the person with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) passes the DMV testing, family and friends should still be on the lookout for deteriorating driving skills since forms of dementia are progressive.

Not every person diagnosed with MCI is able to drive safely. Driving is a very complex activity, requiring quick thinking, instant reactions, timing, coordination, and even good perception. *Safe* driving requires attention, concentration, and the ability to follow particular steps and rules. The driver also needs to be able to make quick and appropriate decisions. For people with dementia, these skills will decline over time. Eventually, driving will no longer be an option.

With an MCI diagnosis the ability to drive is going to be compromised even though some patients—about one in three—may still be able to drive in the first few years after the onset of symptoms. Physicians are required to report the diagnosis to the local motor vehicle commission and the person must pass a driving test in order to stay behind the wheel. As a matter of public policy, that makes sense for several reasons, most importantly, public safety and the liabilities you might assume in the event of an accident.



Challenging a person's right to drive does not always feel justified, but **driving requires the ability to react quickly to a variety of circumstances**. Because of this, a person living with dementia will, at some point, be unable to drive.

The decision to stop driving may be difficult for the person with dementia, and inconvenient for caregivers and family members. If you care for someone with dementia, consider these strategies to prioritize safety and ease the transition.

Planning ahead can help ease the transition. You may want to discuss a planned "driving retirement" in advance before it becomes a sensitive issue. Be sympathetic as you address the topic because retiring from driving and the perceived loss of independence is difficult. For an individual 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. Keep a written record of your observations to share with the person with memory loss, family members, and health care professionals. Your loved one may not remember or recognize the traffic violations, but this will reassure you that you are not just imagining things.

Subtly transition driving responsibilities to others. Let your loved one know that you are happy to drive, arrange for another family member or friend to drive, or research the availability of special transportation services to

Tips & Tools

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.

Have the car “go into the shop for repairs.” Tell your loved one a 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.

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

ease the worry of being stranded or isolated.

Simplify and find ways to reduce the person’s need to drive. For example, you can have prescription medicines, groceries or meals delivered, or cluster errands. Don’t be reluctant to ask others for help.

Ask your physician to advise the person not to drive. Having a “greater authority” impose the restriction on driving may be more effective than trying to dissuade someone from driving yourself. Ask the physician to write a letter or prescription stating that the person with memory loss must not drive. You can then use the document to remind your loved one what has been decided.

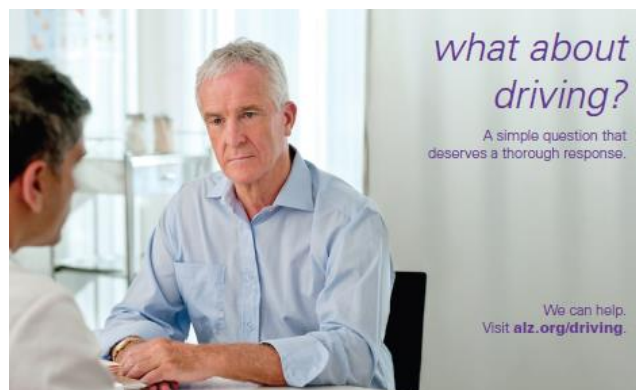
Keep in mind that if a person wanders, he or she can also do so by car. **Consider enrolling in a wandering response service.** Contact the Alzheimer’s Association 24/7 Helpline (800.272.3900) for more information.

Replace his or her driver’s license with a photo identification card. However, do not assume that taking away a driver’s license will necessarily prevent driving. The person may not remember that he or she no longer has a license or even that a license is legally required to drive.

If your loved one insists on driving, consider the following steps as a last resort:

- **Control access to the car keys.** Designate one person who will do all of the driving and give that individual exclusive access to the car keys.
- **Disable the car.** Remove the distributor cap, battery, or starter wire. Ask a mechanic to install a “kill wire” that will prevent the car from starting unless the switch is thrown.
- Give your loved one a **set of keys** that looks like his or her old set, but does not work to start the car.
- **Consider selling the car or giving it to a relative.** This will remove the temptation and the argument, and it may allow you to save enough in insurance premiums, gas, and maintenance costs to pay for public transportation, including taxi rides.

The moment at which your loved one will



need to retire from driving will be different for each person, but most drivers with dementia stop within about three years of the first symptoms of memory loss. This is often in the moderate or mid stage of dementia but, with some types of dementia it might be sooner.

Ideally, an individual will limit or stop driving on his or her own. However, some individuals with dementia may forget that they should not drive or insist on driving even though it is no longer safe. While it is important to maintain respect for your loved one’s feelings, you must always put **safety first**. Stopping will be easier if it has been discussed and planned for in advance. Understand that even if a loved one can drive safely now, he may not always be able to. Keep monitoring for signs of diminished driving skills, and ask your friends and family to do the same. Assess driving skills often and look out for declining reflexes, decision making, confusion, and judgment errors. Consider that vision and hearing loss, medications, and altered emotional states and perception can also affect the capacity to drive.

Remember that each situation is unique. What works for one person may not necessarily work for another. You can get the information about **Dementia and Driving Resource Center** at alz.org/driving