

Driving and Dementia—Illinois

When a person is diagnosed with dementia, the individual and family members tend to 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 judgment, along with memory loss may work together to make driving hazardous.

A diagnosis of Alzheimer's does not necessarily mean the person has lost the ability to drive. However, plans should be made for the inevitable retirement from driving. 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.

People with early stage Alzheimer's and their loved ones are encouraged to discuss this issue, before driving becomes a major concern. People with early stage Alzheimer's should consider making an agreement with their family to give up driving at a certain point. They 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 the 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 or to get a driving assessment. *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, these 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
- Remove the car's distributor cap or battery
- Park the car on another block or in a neighbor's driveway

Seek the assistance of the Department of Revenue.

In Illinois, a driver is required to take a written test every eight years unless no traffic violations have occurred. Everyone must have his or her vision screened when applying for a renewal, with the exception of Safe Driver Renewals. All persons age 75 or older must take a driving test at each renewal. Drivers age 81-86 must have their licenses renewed every two years, while persons age 87 and older must renew annually.

According to the [Illinois Secretary of State's Office Website](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com) (www.cyberdriveillinois.com):

“By law, you must file a [Medical Report Form](#), completed by your physician, if:

- You have any medical or mental condition that may result in a loss of consciousness or any loss of ability to safely drive a vehicle, or
- You take any medications that may impair your ability to drive.

Each time you renew your driver's license you must resubmit a [Medical Report Form](#). By law, you must notify the Secretary of State's office within 10 days of becoming aware of any of these conditions. Failure to do so may lead to the cancellation of your driver's license and driving privileges. If the particular medical condition no longer exists, you must submit a final [Medical Report Form](#) completed by your physician indicating the condition no longer exists, in order to be removed from the follow-up program with this office.”

Are You Worried About the Ability of Another Driver?

The [Illinois Secretary of State's Office Website](http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com) also states that “In order to protect the rights of all persons, the Secretary of State's office is only authorized to investigate potential medical conditions when reported by a licensed physician, member of law enforcement or member of the judicial system. If you know someone you feel could jeopardize traffic safety as the result of a medical condition, contact the individual's doctor or a police officer and request that the Secretary of State's office investigate.”