

PARKINSON'S AND RETIRING FROM DRIVING

Planning to Retire from Driving

Research shows that people outlive their ability to drive by 9.4 years for women and 6.2 years for men¹, yet most drivers do not plan to retire from driving

Many people develop an awareness of when their driving skills are diminishing, often referring to a decreased confidence on the road. In some cases however, fear of loss of independence or isolation overrides one's judgment concerning driving abilities and a driver may deny having problems driving. Giving up a driver's license can be a painful process. It may mark the end of a stage in life and can mean facing the limitations of age and ability. People commonly are concerned about how they will accomplish tasks of daily living if they are deemed unsafe to drive. People with Parkinson's may be additionally fearful that the need to stop driving indicates that their symptoms are progressing.

This help sheet has been prepared by Parkinson Society to help people with Parkinson's and those who care about them become informed about the issues relating to retiring from driving. Included is information on how Parkinson's can affect driving, skill development for older drivers, tips for talking to a driver you have concerns about and strategies for getting around when you no longer drive.

I have Parkinson's. Can I still drive?

When someone receives the diagnosis of a chronic illness such as Parkinson's, a common question is "Can I still drive?" The answer varies from person to person. Driving is a complex activity which requires all of our attention: physically, mentally and emotionally. With Parkinson's your ability to drive safely may be affected due to problems with tremor, stiffness, slowness of movement, reduced ability to multi-task, mental clarity and drowsiness. In general however, many people can continue to drive in the early stages of Parkinson's, particularly if medications are effective. Others can drive safely with vehicle modifications, skill upgrading and restrictions. *Realistically however, there is likely to come a time when you will no longer be able to drive safely and you should plan ahead.*

Parkinson's and Changes in Driving Ability

A number of research studies have identified aspects of Parkinson's that may cause driving to become unsafe over time. In two studies people with Parkinson's were rated as less safe behind the wheel compared with the general population. Some of the problems identified include:

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| Longer reaction times and slower judgment and decision-making | Reduced memory |
| Reduced steering accuracy | Problems moving feet between pedals |
| More difficulty with lane changing, parking and reversing | Early dementia leading to confusion, particularly in unfamiliar locations |
| Visual impairments, particularly in responding to changing light conditions | Excessive daytime sleepiness |
| Upper body stiffness, particularly the neck and arms | Medication side effects including sleepiness, dizziness, blurred vision, confusion and memory impairment |

¹ Foley DJ, Heimovitz HK, Guralnik JM, Brock DB. Driving life expectancy of persons aged 70 years and older in the United States. *Am J Public Health* 2002;92(8):1284-9.

Testing Your Driving

The first step in ensuring you remain a safe driver is to candidly assess your driving skills. A driver with Parkinson's has a two-fold task: assessing general driving skills relating to aging and assessing those affected by Parkinson's symptoms. You may want to ask someone you trust to drive with you and help you evaluate the following:

Do you ...

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| Remember to buckle up | Obey stop signs and traffic lights |
| Yield the right of way | Drive at the appropriate speed; not too slow or too fast |
| Get lost, even on familiar routes | Stop at green lights or at the wrong time |
| Miss noticing other cars, walkers, or bike riders on the road | Stray out of your lane |
| Get honked at or passed often | React too slowly to changing driving situations |

In addition, have you experienced ...

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| Recent near misses or fender benders | Recent tickets for traffic violations |
| Comments from passengers about close calls, near misses or not seeing other vehicles | Recent increase in your car insurance premiums due to traffic violations, at fault accidents, etc. |

Improving Your Driving

All drivers can enhance their driving safety by making adjustments to their driving habits. Some of the options to consider include:

- Ask your doctor whether your medications may affect your driving.
- Be aware of the variation in your energy levels, 'on/off' periods and reduced reaction times.
- Avoid driving when medication is not working optimally.
- Stay fit and active to maintain muscle strength that you need for driving.
- Work on the stretching and flexibility necessary for looking over your shoulder easily.
- Maintain good posture.
- Eliminate distractions while driving. Listening to the radio, talking with a passenger and eating/drinking all affect concentration.
- Avoid nighttime driving if you are affected by vision changes in reduced light.
- Choose familiar, comfortable routes at non-peak hours.
- Consider purchasing a GPS system.
- Share driving responsibilities whenever possible.
- Drive only when you are well rested.
- Drive a little slower (but within a safe range).
- Stick to short trips.

Talking to a Driver You are Concerned About

Talking to a person about their driving can be difficult. Family members and friends often recognize a driver's declining abilities but they are not certain what to say, what to do or where to get help.

How to Describe Your Concerns

1. Find a time when you can drive with the person you are concerned about to *observe first-hand* how they are doing behind the wheel. Assess their driving skills as objectively as you can. If you have concerns, encourage the person to take a self-assessment and visit a medical professional for a driving-fitness check-up. It is important to set aside an agreed-upon time to talk to the person you are concerned about. **Do not bring up your concerns while driving!**

2. Describe your concerns in behavioural terms and be specific to avoid blaming or shaming the person. Consider some of these examples:

“You seemed a little confused at that major intersection and I was quite nervous as you didn’t seem to know how to get out of the situation.”

Not: “You got totally confused at that intersection and didn’t have a clue what to do and you scared me!”

“You were only doing 30 km this afternoon when we were out, and the speed limit along most of the route was 50 km. Did you notice the cars lined up behind us? Is that common for you?”

Not: “You were driving so slowly this afternoon that half the traffic on the road was piled up behind us – didn’t you see that?”

3. Realize that the person you are concerned about may become upset or defensive.

Remember, driving is important for independence and self-worth. Be a good listener. It is not uncommon in these conversations for someone to bring up his or her past good driving record. It is important to acknowledge this but to respectfully refocus the conversation on the need to stop driving. Sometimes saying, “medical conditions can make even the best drivers unsafe” or “Things change. Let’s not talk about the past. We need to focus on the present” can help to refocus the discussion.

4. Ask how the person is feeling and discuss emotions with empathy. Acknowledge that giving up driving is a loss and requires a difficult period of transition. Do not nag someone about giving up the keys. You cannot help a driver if you alienate them.

5. Agree together on a plan of action which may begin with self-imposed limits such as driving only on familiar roads during daylight.

6. Finally, if the person is adamantly resistant to retiring from driving, **talk candidly about the risks**, both to themselves and to others, if they continue to drive unsafely.

Transportation Alternatives

The fears associated with surrendering a driver’s license can be alleviated to some degree by the development of a plan for the transition to a non-driving lifestyle.

Explore public transportation:

- Contact your local transit authority and enquire about discounts and passes for seniors or people with disabilities.
- Discuss the transportation options closest to home including buses and trains.
- Enquire about community shuttles.
- Investigate the volunteer driver services offered by some agencies.
- Ask about the cost of taxi service to frequently visited locations and note the phone number of one or two companies.

Mutual support:

- Recognize that some people are afraid of getting lost using public transit. Arrange for someone to accompany the person on their first outing to gain some confidence.
- Develop a list of names and phone numbers of friends or relatives who are willing to give rides. Also inquire at your local community centre whether they have driver services.

Walking

- Take a walking tour of the neighbourhood and identify amenities within walking distance.

Resources:

DriveABLE (www.driveable.com) is innovative technology to help determine the driving competence of at-risk drivers. To find out about locations and information, call 1-877-433-1494.

Ministry of Transportation Medical Review Section

2680 Keele Street
Downsview, ON M3M 3E6
DriverImprovementOffice@ontario.ca
(416) 235-1773
1-800-268-1481

Approved Driver Rehabilitation Centres for Driving Evaluations

<http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/dandv/driver/medical-review/eval-centres.shtml>

Sources:

- *Determining Medical Fitness to Drive a Motor Vehicle: A Guide for Physicians*. Canadian Medical Assoc. *Driving When You have Parkinson's Disease*. National Parkinson Foundation, 2004
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