

Staying Safe Behind the Wheel: What to Watch For as We Age

Transcript

[0:00 Warning signs]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: So, how do you know when your driving may no longer be safe, and alternatives should be considered? Have you noticed any of the following, or have others said this about your driving?

- Do you weave between or straddle lanes?
- Do other drivers honk or pass you frequently, even when the traffic stream is moving relatively slowly?
- Do you get lost or disoriented easily, even in familiar places?
- Have you received two or more traffic tickets or warnings in the past two years?
- Have you been involved in two or more collisions or ‘near misses’ in the past two years?
- Do you have difficulty working the brake and gas pedals?
- Do you sometimes miss stop signs and other traffic signals?

If you, or a loved one, shows one or more of these signs, talk to your healthcare team and consider taking a comprehensive professional driving evaluation to address any weaknesses.

Now, let’s explore how certain medical conditions can affect your ability to drive safely.

[01:09 Medical conditions and behind-the-wheel abilities]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Many medical conditions that cause health-related changes can negatively impact our behind-the-wheel skills; and, as we age, we’re more likely to have multiple conditions. Let’s explore some of these health-related changes and corresponding medical conditions and what actions you might take to reduce their impact on your ability to drive safely.

[01:37 Cognition]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Driving is a complex task that involves many different skills and body functions. To drive safely, we need to integrate our visual, cognitive, physical, and perceptual skills. It’s sometimes called the ‘super-activity’ of daily living. As people age, they’re more likely to develop health conditions that impair these skills, which may negatively affect their driving ability.

People diagnosed with dementia, for example, should be assessed by their health care team, including an occupational therapist, to determine their fitness to drive.

[02:16 Vision and hearing]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Several eye conditions can impact your ability to drive. Glaucoma results in the loss of peripheral vision. This condition can't be reversed, but the changes can be slowed or even halted with medication and regular check-ups.

When you have cataracts, it can be like having a waterfall in front of your eyes. This condition can usually be corrected with surgery.

Macular degeneration can reduce central vision. Some types of macular degeneration respond better to treatment than others. Regular check-ups are recommended to monitor for this disease.

As we age, we become more sensitive to bright light, often referred to as glare sensitivity. To help with this, wear sunglasses during the day. To avoid being blinded by oncoming cars at night, look to the right side of the road as vehicles pass, focusing on the lane markings to stay on track.

Hearing loss can make it hard to hear horns, bicycle bells and other sounds critical to driving. Have regular hearing tests and use hearing aids as prescribed.

[03:32 Flexibility, movement, and strength]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Many conditions can have a negative effect on your flexibility, range of motion and overall strength.

Osteoarthritis is a relatively common condition that affects the body's joints and causes swelling and pain. Osteoporosis, a disease that weakens the bone, results in less bone mass and strength and can make moving difficult and painful. Other conditions such as fibromyalgia, lupus or gout can also limit your flexibility, movement, and strength.

These conditions and others can cause pain and reduce your range of motion, making it possibly difficult to grasp the steering wheel, apply the brakes, and turn your next to perform blind spot checks. Pain can also slow reaction time.

In-car driving aids can help overcome some of these challenges. An occupational therapist can help those with these conditions to consider how and what modifications might be needed to support their ability to drive. The Canadian Medical Association recommends that people with severe pain or really limited range of motion should not drive.

[04:46 Medications]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: Commonly prescribed drugs such as tranquilizers, opioids or narcotics, depression or anxiety medications, sleeping pills, and over-the-counter medications such as antihistamines, muscle relaxants and cold and flu remedies can cause side effects such as blurred vision, drowsiness, confusion or difficulty concentrating, dizziness or light-headedness, tremors, slowed reaction time and memory lapses – all of which can interfere with the safe operation of a vehicle. Combinations of medications, or the use of alcohol with certain medications, can increase such side effects. Discuss the medications you're taking with your doctor or pharmacist to determine if they might impact your driving. This list of medical conditions is not exhaustive, and you should consult your health care team about your unique situation.

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