

# Hanging Up the Car Keys: When it is No Longer Safe for Seniors to Drive



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One of the most-asked questions of geriatric physicians throughout America won't come as a surprise to many of you: *When is it time to take away the keys?* Also not surprising is that for many senior citizens being able to drive a vehicle represents the last bastion of independence.

Obviously, then, opinions and answers to the question can vary widely. Statistically speaking, in the US, there are currently around 35 million drivers who are 65 and older. Most operate their vehicles safely and don't present a threat to other drivers – or themselves. Some 60 percent of these senior drivers do restrict their time on the road with *self-imposed* “rules of engagement:” They avoid night-time driving, inclement weather, highways and other traffic-prone roadways.

The conventional wisdom is that health conditions (and not chronology) are the deciding factors on when to take away the car keys. Well-being issues that include arthritis, slower reflexes, vision and hearing impairment, dementia and the use of multiple medications are the dominant factors that dictate a senior's ability to safely hold onto his or her driver's license.

Interestingly enough, increased age does play a role in *reported accidents*. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported that the crash rate of older drivers begins increasing at the age of 70, with an even larger jump for motorists in their 80s. Only teenage drivers and “20-somethings” have a worse record.

The primary warning signs to consider are: stopping at an intersection where there is no stop sign or red light, or conversely, accidentally running red lights or stop signs; mistaking the accelerator for the brake pedal; finding traffic signs and signals confusing; getting lost in familiar places; moving from one lane to another without looking; and unexplained dents, broken mirrors or lights on vehicles.

Seniors themselves can play a role in improving their driving skills by getting regular check-ups to ensure their hearing, sight and reflexes are still intact, taking refresher courses on defensive driving, and avoiding certain driving situations (i.e., bad weather or night-time driving).

Losing a license doesn't happen overnight. Like other age-related issues, it's a gradual process. Conversations about driving should also happen over time, and while they may not be easy ones to have with a senior, they are necessary and worthwhile.

It is also worthwhile to remind your loved-ones (or yourself) that the notion of being a free spirit is not tied to four wheels. A life guided by wisdom, curiosity, and an instinct for living each day fully, is always a life well-lived.

Keeping the promise,



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