

How can I talk to my loved one about driving safety?

The transition from driver to passenger is a personal but very important decision, as dementia affects the brain functions that are needed to safely operate a motor vehicle. Your loved one may feel a great sense of loss related to this change; it may be one of the biggest challenges that you face as a caregiver. Consider the following as you navigate this difficult topic:

Physical Causes

- Dementia affects attention, memory, multi-tasking, and response time.
- As the brain changes, so does the ability to judge distances and to react safely to changing road conditions, obstacles, and unexpected movements. Objects may be closer or further away than they appear.
- Your loved one may not be able to appropriately assess a situation or to respond quickly enough to keep themselves and others around them safe.

Environmental Causes

- Your loved one may not be able to recognize symbols in the same way as before. As a result, a stop sign or traffic signal may be misinterpreted or ignored.
- His/her brain may no longer be able to interpret visual information correctly. This is not the same as poor vision, and cannot be corrected with glasses or contact lenses.
- Roadways may be confusing, and your loved one may get lost or disoriented.
- Your loved one may not remember how to operate a motor vehicle safely and may confuse basic maneuvers such as braking and accelerating.

Emotional Causes

- Driving symbolizes independence and purpose. Your loved one may express anger and grief when faced with the potential loss of driving privileges.
- Your loved one may express denial or have a lack of awareness of how the changes in his/her brain may make driving unsafe.



What can I do?

- Begin the discussion as soon as there has been a diagnosis of cognitive impairment. The focus should be on safety. If the individual is still driving, emphasize the reality that the illness will likely progress and that driving will eventually become unsafe.

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What can I do?

- Validate your loved one's frustration. Reassure him/her of your commitment to support him/her. Acknowledge his/her feelings, but remain steadfast in your resolve that driving is unsafe.
- It is common for people with dementia to get lost, especially when they may not recognize or accept that driving is no longer safe. GPS devices such as watches or cell phones can help locate your loved one if he/she becomes lost.

A formal driving evaluation can determine if your loved one may safely operate a motor vehicle. This assessment should be performed annually to evaluate emerging problems. Talk to your doctor about safety concerns and additional resources.

For More Information:

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