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**Elderly Drivers: Stop or Go?**

**By Phyllis Staff, Ph.D.**

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Without so much as a tap on the brakes, my aunt whizzed through another stop sign.

"What are you doing?" I shrieked. "That was a stop sign."

"Oh," she replied rather offhandedly, "they just put those there so you'll look before you go into an intersection."

That was the day I stopped riding with my aunt but not the day she stopped driving. From then on, I had visions of an enormous pink Chevy leading a parade of cascading accidents. And I wasn't far from wrong.

She drove with what she knew to be the utmost caution. . . .never exceeding 30 miles per hour, even on I35! She expected, even demanded that traffic would give way to her like the seas parted for Moses. Sometimes, it did. But mostly, driving with her was a harrowing experience with no end in sight.

So, when do the elderly become a menace on the roads? And, what can you do when they refuse to give up the keys? Here are a few suggestions I've found.

**Causes for Concern**

**Poor Vision** – Cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration can reduce visual acuity and limit visual fields, so a yearly eye exam is imperative for the elderly driver. Ask the doctor about driving, and don't take the word of the elderly driver on the results of her exam.

**Poor Hearing** – Something as simple as a clogged ear passage can create a hearing loss. A doctor can identify the problem and offer solutions, so have elderly hearing checked yearly.

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**Poor Flexibility and Limited Range of Motion** – Good drivers rely on looking out rear and side windows as well as checking rearview mirrors. When a driver lacks the ability to turn his head and shoulders to look outside, he may not see oncoming vehicles or obstacles traveling in the car's blindspot.

**Reduced Reaction Time** – As we age, we slow down, and reaction times diminish. Keeping extra space between the driver's and other cars can help reduce the likelihood of accidents, but there comes a time when reactions are too slow for road safety. [Click here](#) for a reaction time test that will show you graphically how far you travel after you see a red light!

### How to Get (and Keep) the Keys

A few states, , require road tests for persons over 65 when their licenses are renewed. An additional sss states require vision tests with license renewals. Consider yourself fortunate if you live in one of

these states because it may be that the state will refuse to renew the elder's license. If you live elsewhere, here are a few tricks to try.

**Talk with your Elder about the Convenience of Mass Transit** – Many mass transit authorities have special services and special fares for the elderly and disabled. Check with your local transit authority. And talk with your elder about how nice it is to be able to enjoy the scenery while someone else does the driving.

**Give Your Elder a Refresher Course** – Not only will a refresher course improve road awareness, it may help your elder earn a discount on his car insurance. Courses and informative pamphlets are available from the AARP, AAA, and the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. You'll find links to these sites at the end of this article.

**Report unsafe driving to your local Department of Public Safety.** They may have additional help to offer you.

**"Break" the Car** – My teenagers unplugged a few vital wires when my father, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, refused to relinquish the keys. We knew his cognitive ability was far too impaired for him to recognize the problem, and he was always comforted when we said we'd have the car repaired "soon."

**Remove the Keys** – Distract your elder from finding "lost" keys by offering an immediate alternative way to go somewhere. While this may be the most unpleasant way to stop your elder from driving, remember that you are not only protecting him but all the rest of us as well.

And what happened to my aunt? She got a ticket from a wonderful traffic officer whom we all blessed on a daily basis! Fearing the loss of her auto insurance, she voluntarily gave up driving.

### Web Resources

[Driving Safely While Aging Gracefully](#) is a free booklet you can read online.

## Elderly Drivers: Stop or Go?

AARP offers a refresher course for elderly drivers as well as a number of other helpful resources. See their site at

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has a terrific new site, [seniordrivers.org](http://seniordrivers.org), that you shouldn't miss if you're a senior driver or have a senior driver in your family. Exercises, examples of perceptual loss due to aging, emergency tips, and much, much more – all free. Please don't miss it!

For more in depth information on elderly drivers, see the OLR research report.

Phyllis Staff, Ph.D. – Phyllis Staff is an experimental psychologist and the CEO of The Best Is Yet.Net, an internet company that helps seniors and caregivers find trustworthy residential care. She is the author of *How to Find Great Senior Housing: A Roadmap for Elders and Those Who Love Them*. She is also the daughter of a victim of Alzheimer's disease. Visit the author's web site at

### **Car Insurance. Bad Eyesight Threatens Your Insurance Cover.**

**By Michael Challiner**

If you have an accident and it's found that you'd failed to keep your car roadworthy, for example excessively worn tyres, and that was a contributory factor in the accident, your insurer will probably refuse to pay up. And the police may also show an interest too! Quite reasonable many of you will say. But what if it's you that's un-roadworthy?

How many driving accidents are accompanied by the comment "I didn't see the other vehicle"? And what happens if the problem was your eyesight? Has it deteriorated to a dangerous extent?

Well all of us clearly know if we have an eyesight problem but there are opticians to help on every high street. Remember, if you need contact lenses or glasses for driving then you must wear them and if your eyesight deteriorates you should get a new prescription. It's the legal responsibility of all drivers to ensure that they're safe to drive.

Only last week I drew up alongside an elderly driver who was clearly having trouble reading the junction signs. He was leaning forward trying to read the signs indicating towards Leeds and rolling forward at 10 mph - all this at traffic lights that by this time had turned red - and he clearly hadn't seen those! He was lucky that the cars coming across from the right saw him early. I'm not even sure he saw them either!

The law is quite straightforward - it states that any driving licence holder who cannot meet the minimum level of eyesight must not drive. They are also required to surrender their licence.

The eyesight test for drivers' states that you must be able to read a number plate containing letters and figures 50 mm wide and 79mm high (that's a legal number plate) from a distance of 20 meters. But you can use your driving glasses.

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Having said that there's no legal obligation for you to have regular eyesight tests but you are required to tell the DVLA if you develop any medical problem that affects your fitness to drive. If you don't tell them, it's a criminal offence.

In some American states drivers have to take an eye test every five years but not in the UK. Here, driver aged 70 and over must complete a medical form every three years confirming their fitness to drive and the definition of "fitness" includes eyesight. If these drivers fail to send in their medical form, they lose their driving licence. (I wonder what that elderly gentleman at the traffic lights said on his?)

On the insurance front, if you are involved in an accident where your defective eyesight was a contributory factor, your insurance company may well argue that you were negligent and refuse to pay out. This could be simply because you needed glasses to drive but weren't wearing them at the time.

So drive carefully, and keep your eyes peeled - elderly gentleman in Leeds please take note!

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