



Are you safe at any speed? Driving fitness tips for seniors

An elderly gentleman was driving down the highway at his usual slow speed. A highway patrolman pulled him over and said, "I guess you know why I stopped you, sir." The elderly gentleman said, "Sure I do! I was the only one you could catch!"

Tired of the jokes? You're not alone. One-third of all drivers are seniors (United States Senior Directory). But while many are good drivers with experience on their side, declining vision, hearing and reaction time may create safety hazards. How can you drive safely as long as possible? Will you know when it's time to hand over the keys? Consider these strategies.

Take a driver improvement class. AARP offers a class called *55 Alive*. For \$10, you can refine driving skills and learn defensive driving techniques. Classes focus on vision and hearing changes, effects of medication on your ability to react quickly, and knowing when you have the right if way. By completing this program, you may earn eligibility for a state-mandated multi-year auto insurance discount. Visit www.aarp.org to find a class. Or check your driving prowess with their driver's I.Q. test and *Close Call Quiz*.

Take time to evaluate your car. Can you operate door handles and gearshifts without difficulty? Are you easily able to adjust the driver's seat for proper sightline and distance from the controls? Do seatbelts fasten and unfasten with ease? Are dashboard controls easy to see, read and understand? Does your car have features to enhance your peripheral vision?

Be aware of stressful driving situations. Consider avoiding nighttime driving. Health Alliance reports that 90 percent of any driver's reaction time depends on vision. Older drivers face decreased depth perception, color recognition and peripheral vision. In fact, industry experts estimate that seniors need up to 50 percent more light to drive than a 30-year-old. To further reduce driving stress, avoid rush hour traffic, limit freeway driving and allow plenty of time to reach your destination.

Driving allows you the freedom to visit family and friends, attend social gatherings and participate in community activities on your own terms. But when is it time to move out of the driver's seat? American Geriatrics offers this checklist of unsafe driving habits: stopping at a green light, in the middle of an intersection or when there is no reason to stop; mistaking the gas pedal for the brake; finding traffic signs or signals confusing; running red lights or stop signs; changing lanes without looking; and getting lost on familiar routes.

Preserve your right to drive. Learn about the pitfalls of senior driving, and take advantage of driver's education for seniors and elder-friendly car features. Ask your doctor to evaluate your ability to drive safely. And most importantly, know when to ask for help.

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