

Care Partner Information

Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia Caregiving Tips

Driving and Dementia

Dementia affects a person's ability to drive safely. Drivers with dementia are more likely to get into car crashes, and unsafe drivers are a major risk to everyone on the road. However, most people with dementia think they can drive safely, even when they can't. That's because dementia affects memory, thinking, and judgment, and people with dementia don't realize that they are poor drivers. Therefore, it is up to everyone—the family members, care partners, and health providers—to be sure that the person's driving ability is evaluated, and a plan is made.

How Does Dementia Affect Driving Safety?

People with dementia forget where they are going, get confused while driving, and get lost. They have trouble with judging distances, staying in their lanes, or understanding signs. They have trouble keeping their attention on the important things, and are easily distracted. Also, they have trouble recognizing when a change in traffic pattern is important—such as a car quickly pulling out into traffic, or a ball rolling onto the road.

Signs of Unsafe Driving	
Getting lost or forgetting how to find places.	Driving too slowly.
Having accidents or bumping into things.	Avoiding busy streets.
Not following traffic signs.	Making mistakes while driving, especially at intersections.
Getting angry or confused while driving.	Drifting in and out of lanes.

Everyone is Unique

Some people in the early stages of dementia may be safe to drive if they limit their driving to familiar neighborhoods and short trips. But, it's never too early to begin the conversation and have a plan for what to do when the person can't drive safely anymore.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and promotoras care for someone with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias. The information in the series offers general advice and does not distinguish between the different types of dementia.

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A good rule is if you think the person is unsafe, they probably are unsafe. If you don't feel comfortable riding with them, or wouldn't want your child or grandchild riding with them, then they are probably an unsafe driver.

Having the Conversation

As you think about the conversation, remember that driving is a very emotional topic for most people. Driving is important for independence, so most people are very reluctant to give it up. Some people give up, or "retire" from driving without a problem. But for others, it can be very hard. People with dementia will lack the insight or judgment to know that they are a risky driver, and so it may be very upsetting when you tell them they shouldn't drive. A formal driving evaluation may help. It is important to remember that only the state motor vehicle division can take away a drivers license.

The table below lists some ideas about how to start the conversation and what to do as the dementia progresses.

Starting the Conversation	
Understand that it is hard for someone to give up driving.	Discuss your concerns, and the need to prepare for the future.
Be patient and firm.	Involve family and close friends.
Appeal to their wish to be responsible and not hurt anyone with their car.	Offer alternatives like: family members or friends; taxi service; special transportation; or home delivery of groceries, meals, medications.
Have an authority figure (such as a health provider or lawyer) be part of the conversation .	

People with dementia may stop driving in stages, or all at once. Either way, the person will probably be sad for a while about the loss of independence. Sometimes even after a person has "retired" from driving, they want to start again. Try to be patient yet firm. Remember an unsafe driver is a danger on the road. They can hurt themselves. They can hurt you or your family.

Next Steps If Talking Doesn't Work: (1) Get their health provider to notify the motor vehicle department; (2) keep keys and the car out of sight; (3) disable the car so it won't start.

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