

YOUR HEALTH *and driving*



Your health is closely connected to your driving. You must be able to see well enough to detect hazards in different types of lighting, judge distances, adjust to the speed of traffic, and read road signs. Your brain must be alert enough to quickly decide the correct course of action in any type of traffic situation, including unexpected ones. Your body must also be able to respond and react quickly.

As you get older, you change physically and mentally. These changes can, and do, affect your driving skills. Getting older does not automatically make you a poor driver. Many people continue to be safe drivers well into their retirement years. You have control over lifestyle choices that may affect your health, for example, what and when you eat, how much and what kind of exercise you get, how you handle stress, how much social interaction you seek, and so forth. A healthy, responsive body, along with an alert mind, requires good nutrition, adequate rest, and exercise to maintain or increase strength, flexibility, and sharp reflexes.

Physical and Mental Fitness.

Ageing brings changes in our physical mobility. For example, can you still turn your head to look over your shoulder when backing or changing lanes? Do you feel weakness in your arms or legs when steering, braking, or accelerating? Staying fit and active will help you maintain the muscle strength and the flexibility you need to drive safely.

Exercise and physical activity don't have to be strenuous and don't have to require special equipment or special clothing. You can exercise in the comfort of your own home by lifting light-weight items such as soup cans or 500 ml water bottles. You can rhythmically squeeze a small ball or a stuffed toy to strengthen your hand and upper arms while watching television.

No matter what your health condition or age, there is some type of exercise or activity you can do that will benefit you. Some suggested activities could be :

Walking

Bowling

Gardening

Dancing

Golf

Aquarobics

Lifting Weights

Shopping

The important thing is to remain active and do what is comfortable for you. Exercise not only makes driving easier and safer, it can prevent or delay many disabilities, diseases, and other conditions. Ask your doctor what type of activity would be suitable for you and be sure to consult them before beginning any new exercise program.

Mental exercise is also beneficial. Read newspapers and books, attempt crossword puzzles, and play games that use words or numbers, even if you only keep score. Jigsaw puzzles sharpen your visual search skills while charades and solitaire are activities that involve your thinking skills

Driving fitness for older adults

Physical activity and exercise improve driving ability.

Driving a car requires strength and agility to depress the brake and accelerator pedals, turn the steering wheel, shift gears, and even to enter and exit the vehicle. Neck and trunk flexibility is essential for looking over the shoulder, change lanes, and look left or right to check for traffic. Reaching for a seat belt requires a certain range of motion in the shoulders. The driver also must have the endurance to physically perform and remain alert.

Have your eyes tested regularly.

About 90 percent of the information required for driving safety relates to vision. Normal aging affects a number of eye functions key to older drivers seeing objects on and near the roadway. Conditions that affect vision and appear more frequently with age include cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration, among others.

Mental alertness contributes to driving fitness.

Maintaining mental agility as one grows older is as important as maintaining physical agility. Intellectual stimulation promotes brain growth in animals and protects against cognitive decline in humans. In animal studies, brains can shrink if deprived of thought-provoking toys and enriched environments. These results lead researchers to conclude that in humans, age-associated memory loss could be partly attributed to lack of mental stimulation.

Know the effects of your medications on driving alertness.

Some medications affect alertness and vision. The more medications consumed, the greater the risk for side effects and interactions. These side effects may influence the ability to focus on driving. Older adults as a group are more susceptible to adverse reactions to medications because of the number they take each day — more than any other age group — and because of physiological changes due to aging. Therefore, optimal management of medications becomes even more crucial for older drivers. Encourage older drivers to speak with their prescribing physicians or pharmacists about the affect of their multiple medications on driving.

Get adequate sleep and rest for driving alertness.

Not being able to get the proper rest during the night can cause sleep deprivation that impairs concentration and leads to mistakes. Surprisingly, the person may not even feel sleepy.

Refresh Your Knowledge of the Rules of the Road.

Many older drivers today never took a formal driver-education class. They passed their driving tests by reading the RTA's booklet and practicing with a family member in a parking lot or paddock. Cars, roads and driving have changed over the past 40 years or more, and drivers have had few opportunities to refresh their knowledge aside from "on-the-road" training.