



Driving may be a touchy issue for older adults and families

Madison - Families often worry about how safe is it for their family member to drive as they age. Older adults are also concerned and the decision of when to limit or give up driving is a difficult decision for everyone involved. Families can help the older driver make safe driving decisions by focusing on their changing abilities and finding ways to keep them mobile, says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging.

Although accidents involving older drivers raise the issue of safe driving for older adults, statistics show that older drivers as a group are safe drivers. They demonstrate high seat belt use and few citations for alcohol-related or moving violations. However, medical conditions, the use of medications, and reduced physical abilities can mean a greater individual risk of accidents and injury.

When you also consider that to many older adults driving represents independence, driving retirement can be an emotional issue. Sensitive family conversations can make a difference, Brintnall-Peterson says. Although they might be uncomfortable, these conversations will help older adults make appropriate decisions. They may conclude that they should drive less, avoid certain road conditions or stop driving altogether.

Even if an older driver agrees that they need to limit or stop driving, they will likely feel sad or depressed at the thought. They understand that this means they will leave the house less often, become more dependent on others, and have a more limited social life. Discuss these concerns and develop strategies such as using local transportation, car pooling, developing a schedule of family and friends who can be called upon to provide transportation or securing someone they can pay if local transportation isn't available. This is an opportunity to be creative as a family in finding ways to keep the older adult active and mobile within their community without driving themselves.

Having conversations early about safe driving will help establish a pattern of honest discussion and allows the older adult time to consider his or her driving skills and what changes they might need to make. This also makes it easier when driving situations occur later that indicate changes need to be made.

To open the conversation, here are some ideas:

- Talk about health and safety first. Talk about driving in the context of other safety concerns and focus on keeping the older adult mobile in safe ways.
- Talk about how driving isn't what it used to be. Talk about road conditions, especially the faster, heavier traffic that makes driving more stressful.
- Reference media articles, such as, did you hear about the car accident in the news today? Accident reports are an opportunity to explore older adults' attitudes about unsafe drivers and who should help them decide when to retire from driving.
- Ask about how they worked with their own parents when driving issues came up. How did Grandpa stop driving? Provide an opportunity to reveal personal feelings about driving and when families should intervene.
- Look for opportunities to discuss driving restrictions and the ability to drive defensively.

- Give positive support to decisions the older adult makes to modify his or her own driving. For example, don't dismiss the older adult as a worrier if they are leaving a family gathering before dark. Be supportive of their decision to limit night driving.
- Be aware of sedative effects of any new medication that could have an effect on driving ability. Getting lost in a familiar place should trigger a doctor's visit.
- Use economic arguments such as the rising price of gas and oil, the expense of car maintenance (tires, tune-ups, insurance), registration and license fees, and the depreciation of car value. Present the idea that instead of having vehicle expenses they could use the money to hire someone to drive them, the concept of their "own chauffeur."

Before you ask an older family member to restrict their driving or stop altogether, learn the warning signs of driving problems and observe the older driver over time. If necessary, discuss your concerns with a doctor. Help the older adult find alternative transportation that works for them, and be supportive. It can be difficult to make the transition from driver to passenger.

Have conversations about safe driving early on, encourage future planning, and respect the older adult's ability to make appropriate decisions for themselves. Observe their driving behavior. Knowing firsthand how the older family member drives will help families know if and when they need to intervene. Also keep in mind what driving represents to the older adult and find ways to help them replace this loss.

For more information, contact your county UW-Extension office. Visit the American Medical Association web site for guidelines for older drivers: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/8925.html>. Also visit the AARP web site at <http://www.aarp.org/life/drive/> for information on older driver safety.

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