

PARKINSON'S AND DRIVING

Research shows that people outlive their ability to drive by 9.4 years for women and 6.2 years for men, yet most drivers do not plan to retire from driving.

Many people develop an awareness of when their driving skills are diminishing, often referring to a decreased confidence on the road. In some cases, however, fear of loss of independence or isolation overrides one's judgement concerning driving abilities, and they may deny having problems driving. Giving up a driver's license can be a painful process. It may mark the end of a stage in life, and can mean facing the limitations of age and ability. People commonly are concerned about how they will accomplish tasks of daily living if they are deemed unsafe to drive. People with Parkinson's disease (PD) may be additionally fearful that the need to stop driving indicates that their symptoms are progressing.

Changes in Driving Ability

When someone receives the diagnosis of a chronic illness such as Parkinson's, a common question is "Can I still drive?". The answer varies from person to person. Driving is a complex activity which requires all of our attention, physically and mentally. With PD, your ability to drive safely may be affected due to problems with tremor, stiffness, slowness of movement, reduced ability to multi-task, mental clarity, and drowsiness. In general, however, many people can continue to drive in the early stages of PD, particularly if medications are effective. Others can drive safely with vehicle modifications, skill upgrading, and restrictions. *Realistically, there is likely to come a time when you will no longer be able to drive safely, and you should plan ahead for the possibility.*

A number of research studies have identified aspects of Parkinson's that may cause driving to become unsafe over time. In two studies, people with PD were rated as less safe behind the wheel compared with the general population. Some of the problems identified include:

- longer reaction times, and slower judgement and decision-making
- reduced steering accuracy
- more difficulty with lane changing, parking, and reversing
- visual impairments, particularly in responding to changing light conditions
- upper body stiffness, particularly in the neck and arms
- reduced memory
- problems moving feet between pedals
- early dementia, leading to confusion, particularly in unfamiliar locations
- excessive daytime sleepiness
- medication side effects, including sleepiness, dizziness, blurred vision, confusion, and memory impairment

Testing Your Driving

The first step in ensuring you remain a safe driver is to candidly assess your driving skills. A driver with PD has a two-fold task: assessing general driving skills related to aging, and assessing those affected by PD symptoms. You may want to ask someone you trust to drive with you, and help you evaluate the following:

Do you...

- remember to buckle up?
- yield the right of way?
- get lost, even on familiar routes?
- miss noticing other cars or bikes on the road?
- get honked at or passed often?
- obey stop signs and traffic lights?
- drive at an appropriate speed?
- stop at green lights, or at the wrong time?
- stray out of your lane?
- react too slowly to changing driving situations?

In addition, have you experienced...

- recent near misses, or fender benders?
- comments from passengers about close calls, near misses, or not seeing other vehicles?
- recent tickets for traffic violations?
- recent increase in your car insurance premiums due to traffic violations, at fault accidents, etc.?

Improving Your Driving

All drivers can benefit from enhancing their driving safety by making adjustments to their habits. Some of the options to consider include:

- asking your doctor whether your medications may affect your driving
- being aware of the variation in your energy levels, “on/off” periods, and reduced reaction times
- avoiding driving when medication is not working optimally
- staying fit and active to maintain muscle strength that you need for driving
- working on the stretching and flexibility necessary for looking over your shoulder easily
- maintaining good posture
- eliminating distractions while driving – listening to the radio, talking with a passenger, eating, and drinking all affect concentration
- avoiding nighttime driving if you are affected by vision changes in reduced light
- choosing familiar, comfortable routes at non-peak hours
- purchasing a GPS system
- sharing driving responsibilities
- driving only when you are well rested
- driving a little slower, but within a safe range
- sticking to short trips

Information for Carepartners

Talking to a person about their driving can be difficult. Family members and friends often recognize a driver’s declining abilities, but are not certain what to say, what to do, or where to get help.

How do describe your concerns

- 1. Find a time when you can drive with the person** you are concerned about to observe first-hand how they are doing behind the wheel. Assess their driving skills as objectively as you can. If you have concerns, encourage the person to take a self-assessment and visit a medical professional for a driving fitness check-up. It is important to set aside an agreed-upon time to talk to the person you are concerned about. *Do not bring up your concerns while driving!*
- 2. Describe your concerns in behavioural terms, and be specific** to avoid blaming or shaming the person. Consider some of these examples:

“You seemed a little confused at that major intersection, and I was quite nervous as you didn’t seem to know how to get out of that situation.”

Not: “You got totally confused at that intersection, and didn’t have a clue what to do – you scared me!”

“You were only doing 30km/h this afternoon when we were out, and the speed limit along most of the route was 50km/h. Did you notice the cars lined up behind us? Is that common for you?”

Not: “You were driving so slow this afternoon that half the traffic on the road was piled up behind us – didn’t you see that?”

- 3. Realize that the person you are concerned about may become upset or defensive.** Remember, driving is important for their independence and self-worth. Be a good listener. It is not uncommon in these conversations for someone to bring up their past good driving record. It is important to acknowledge this but to respectfully re-focus the conversation on the need to stop driving. Sometimes, saying “medical conditions can make even the best drivers unsafe” or “things change, let’s not talk about the past. We need to focus on the present” can help to refocus the discussion.
- 4. Ask how the person is feeling, and discuss their emotions with empathy.** Acknowledge that giving up driving is a loss and requires a difficult period of transition. Do not nag someone about giving up the keys. You can’t help a driver if you alienate them.
- 5. Agree together on a plan of action,** which may begin with self-imposed limits such as driving only on familiar roads during daylight.
- 6. Talk candidly about the risks of unsafe driving,** both to themselves and to others, if the person is adamantly resistant to retiring from driving.

Transportation Alternatives

The fears associated with surrendering a driver’s license can be alleviated to some degree by the development of a plan for the transition to a non-driving lifestyle.

Explore public transportation:

- Contact your local transit authority, or visit their website, to enquire about discounts and passes for seniors or people with disabilities.
- Discover the transportation options closest to home including buses and trains.
- Enquire about community shuttles.
- Investigate the volunteer driver services offered by some agencies.
- Ask about the cost of taxi service to frequently visited locations, and note the phone numbers of one or two companies.

Mutual support:

- Recognize that some people are afraid of getting lost using public transit. Arrange for someone to accompany the person on their first outing to gain some confidence.
- Develop a list of names and phone numbers of friends or relatives who are willing to give rides. Also inquire at your local community centre whether they have driver services.

Walking:

- Take a walking tour of your neighbourhood, and identify amenities within walking distance.

Reporting a Dangerous Driver

When all options have been explored and have been met with resistance, a carepartner or concerned friend may be faced with the difficult decision to report a dangerous driver. Reports are made to the Office of the Superintendent of Motor Vehicles (OSMV). The OSMV may require a driver to have vision and medical tests to help determine whether they are able to drive safely.

When making a report, note the following:

- OSMV requires as much identifying information as possible about the driver in question, including their full name, date of birth, address, and license plate number, if possible.
- Anonymous or verbal reports are not accepted.
- Reports must be in writing, and include supporting reasons why the person is no longer fit to drive.
- Reports must be from a person with first-hand knowledge of the situation and include the full name and contact number or address of the person providing the report.

Reports can be sent to:

RoadSafetyBC
Attn: Driver Fitness Unit
PO Box 9254 STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC V8W 9J2

Additional Resources

RoadSafety BC | www2.gov.bc.ca/roadsafetybc

Insurance Corporation of BC (ICBC) | www.icbc.com

Driver Services Centre, Greater Vancouver | 604-661-2255

Customer Services Headquarters | 1-800-950-1498

Driving School Locations | Driver Training in BC | www.dtcbc.com/resources/ds-locations

Cognitive Assessment for Drivers | DriveABLE | www.driveable.com

Driver Improvement Program Fact Sheet | OSMV | bit.ly/2QfmhMD

Seniors' Driving Toolkit | Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) | www.caa.ca/seniors

BC Transit | www.bctransit.ca | 250-385-2551

Bus Pass Program | Government of BC | bit.ly/2Qn6dZc

BC Taxi-Saver Program & HandyCard | bit.ly/2QnYvhi