

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

Senior Driving Follow-Up: Know When to Say When

Last week's column on your relationship with your car and your driving generated a lot of feedback. It's clear to me that there's a real thirst for information on this matter—a thirst that persists despite the Commonwealth's best efforts to inform and educate seniors and their loved ones.

In this column you'll discover some more information about the State of Driving in Massachusetts as well as some advice and resources you can use if you or someone you know is at the point where it's safer for them and the general public to stop driving.

Drivers are legally responsible for their own actions behind the wheel. A serious traffic accident, or even a series of seemingly minor infractions, may indicate that it's time to evaluate a senior's health and driving skills. Here are a few additional signs of unsafe driving:

- Failure to yield to oncoming traffic (or judge speeds)
- Failure to signal
- Rushed or unpredictable lane changes
- Crossing over the center line
- Abrupt stops or accelerations
- Failure to check the blind spot

According to www.mass.gov, Massachusetts is one of the few states that does not mandate driver testing after a designated age at the RMV. Instead of numeric guidelines, the state asks drivers to determine when they should stop driving by their physical and cognitive ability, and also asks drivers to seek guidance from medical professionals, family and friends in making that decision.

Late last month, the Commonwealth's Joint Committee on Transportation held a hearing that focused on the issue of retesting older drivers.

Testifying at the hearing, Bob Stern, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Neurology at the Boston University School of Medicine, said: “It is critical that drivers who are safe to drive remain able to do so, and that those who are unsafe stop driving immediately.” He added, “Driving is independence, a way to express yourself. There needs to be a decision based on ability and skill, not just age. Age alone does not make someone crash.”

Elizabeth Dugan, Ph.D., Associate Professor at UMASS Boston and author of *The Driving Dilemma: The Complete Resource Guide for Older Drivers and Their Families*, testified: “A comprehensive solution to road safety will require reform in medical reporting, licensing procedures, and evaluations of our reforms to make sure we are obtaining gains in safety.”

Agreeing with Dr. Stern, Dr. Dugan said: “A comprehensive solution to road safety should include in-person renewal requirements. There is no evidence to suggest that mandatory age-based road tests of 85-year-old drivers will reduce fatalities.”

As always quick to weigh in on issues affecting quality of life among seniors, AARP Massachusetts Director Deborah Banda issued a statement on Policies to Improve Driver Licensing Standards and Make Roads safer. Banda said, "the aging of our population will have wide-reaching impact on everything from health care, housing and work to transportation. We need to fix the driver licensing system in Massachusetts to make the roads safer for everyone. And we need a comprehensive approach that provides alternatives when driving is no longer the best option."

RESOURCES

- AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety Mature Driver website. This section of the AAA website can help you and other drivers stay safely behind the wheel for as many years as possible.
□ <http://www.seniordrivers.org/driving/driving.cfm>
- AARP Driver Safety: The AARP Driver Safety Program is the nation's first and largest refresher course for drivers age 50 and up. □ http://www.aarp.org/families/driver_safety/
- National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration: *How to Understand & Influence Older Drivers*. This booklet helps families and friends of older drivers understand when and how driving changes may be needed.
<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/olddrive/UnderstandOlderDri>

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- The DriveWise program at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center offers an objective evaluation of driving safety for drivers of all ages who have neurological, psychological, and/or physical impairments that might impair driving safety. DriveWise clinicians work with patients, their families, and their physicians to provide a comprehensive overview of each person's driving abilities. Note that the DriveWise program is private pay; insurance usually does not cover the costs of assessment of driving safety. Call Mickey Lentz at ☐617-667-4074.

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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