

# DRIVING FOR LIFE



Safety tips and warning signs: Helping older drivers remain safer for longer on Queensland roads

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# INTRODUCTION

Driving is fundamental to our everyday lives in Queensland. It provides us with independence, access to family, friends, essential medical services, work and hobbies and even helps us get around when our mobility declines. Essentially it helps us to live well and to live a quality life.

Being older doesn't automatically make a person an unsafe driver. It is ability, not age, that determines a person's safety behind the wheel. In this way older drivers should continue to drive as long as it's safe.

However, driving may become difficult and even unsafe if the aging process is affected by health issues. Medical conditions and the medications used to treat them can either subtly or obviously impact on driving safety.

Drivers, regardless of age, have a responsibility to themselves, passengers and other road users to carefully evaluate their driving skills to ensure they continue to be safe road users. This booklet aims to help you identify your changing skills, your strengths and weaknesses and their impact on driving so that you may continue to make responsible decisions.



## DRIVING – A daily activity

Driving is one of the most complex everyday activities we do. On average, drivers make between 8 and 12 decisions every kilometre and with less than a second to make each decision! Driving involves accurate and timely synthesis of information within our brain and the coordination of our limbs to operate a vehicle and respond to unexpected situations on the road. Perhaps because it's such a familiar activity we take it for granted – we drive on autopilot.

A health-related issue can very quickly impair this complex process. Unfortunately as people age, health issues become more prevalent. It is important to honestly re-evaluate driving skills over a lifetime in order to balance a desire to maintain mobility with safety on the road.

Please take a moment to think about how you would answer the following question:

**Have my driving skills changed over time?**



# HEALTH ISSUES AND DRIVING – How age affects your driving

The natural process of aging results in some deterioration in function over time. Moderate deterioration is not thought to impact driving safety. However deterioration in a number of functional areas and particularly a deterioration in thinking ability, can result in increased accident risk as we age. Table 1 below illustrates some of the main age-related health issues and their impact on driving.

AGE-RELATED HEALTH ISSUES	IMPACT ON DRIVING
Slowed information processing speed	Difficulty with reacting in dense traffic situations, e.g. changing lanes, merging onto a motorway, making judgements at intersections, navigating unfamiliar roads.
Dementia (symptoms depend on stage of dementia process – many drivers with mild dementia can still drive)	Failure to observe traffic signs; stopping or slowing down through green traffic lights; slowed reaction speed; confusion with pedals; poor judgement; errors at intersections; poor lane control; getting lost in familiar areas; getting angry, stressed or confused while driving.
Deteriorating Vision (e.g. cataracts, glaucoma, diabetes)	Glare from oncoming headlights and traffic lights; peripheral vision loss, e.g. noticing pedestrians too late; difficulty seeing details; loss of night vision.
Restricted Joint Movement – e.g. arthritis	Observing blind spots; reduced strength and flexibility can affect reaction time and coordination; arthritis can impact gear/brake manipulation.



# HEALTH ISSUES AND DRIVING –

## How age affects your driving

Heart Conditions	Fatigue can reduce thinking capacity (see information processing speed); an individual with a history of loss of consciousness or fainting due to an abnormal heart rhythm should talk to their doctor about their ability to drive; the onset of chest pain, palpitations or breathlessness can also affect concentration and therefore driving ability.
Diabetes	A 'severe hypoglycaemic event' affects brain function and can cause impaired thinking skills, perception and motor skills or a complete loss of consciousness. The minimum period of time to return to driving post severe hypoglycaemic event is 6 weeks. Resulting vision and eye disorders and foot neuropathy may affect safe operation of the vehicle.
Stroke	Symptoms are variable, dependent on location and severity of stroke; loss of use of one side of the body may require vehicle modifications, e.g. hand controls, left foot accelerator. Various cognitive and perceptual symptoms may also impact on driving ability.
Parkinson's Disease	Slowness of movement and rigidity may slow reaction speed; decreased information processing speed at some stage in the disease process. Thinking capacity may be affected dependent on disease process.

**Have I been diagnosed with any of these conditions?**

## WARNING SIGNS – A self-test for drivers

The following questions are designed to help you self-monitor any changes in your driving ability. Simply check any box that applies to you. *Family members/passengers may also find this a useful tool.*

### Do you:

- Get flustered driving on busy or unfamiliar roads?
- Have trouble driving at night?
- Lose your way when travelling to/from familiar places?
- Have trouble judging distances and speed of other cars and objects?
- Have trouble seeing when there is glare?
- Have difficulty at major intersections?
- Get tired when driving during the day?
- Notice effects of medications on your driving ability?
- Fail to give way to the right?
- Stop at green traffic lights or slow down?
- Notice cars wanting to pass you from behind – driving too slow?
- Fail to notice pedestrians or cyclists until the last minute?
- Fail to give way to other cars?
- Change lanes with little regard to other cars?
- Press simultaneously on the brake and accelerator?
- Have near misses or scrapes where you didn't before (particularly on one side of the vehicle)?

**If you have checked any boxes, make an appointment with your GP to discuss if these are related to any health issues. It's important to distinguish between lifelong driving habits and medical reasons for these observations – your doctor can help you do this. There may be simple solutions that can significantly impact your safety when driving and the safety of other road users.**



## YOU IDENTIFIED A FEW ISSUES – What happens next?

The law requires Queenslanders to report any permanent or long-term condition that is likely to affect their safe driving ability to Queensland Transport. Failure to report may result in prosecution in the case of an accident and vehicle insurance may be void. If a long-term medical condition has been diagnosed this must be reported to Queensland Transport. This does not mean that your licence will be cancelled. In Queensland, doctors have the final say regarding driving capacity where there is an underlying medical condition.

Queensland Transport will seek medical advice. A doctor may provide advice on how a medical condition impacts your driving safety. A doctor may also help manage any health issues so that you can continue to drive safely.

The first step is to make an appointment with your GP or relevant specialist.

If the doctor is unsure, they may refer for an Occupational Therapy Driving Assessment.

### What is an Occupational Therapy Driving Assessment?

An Occupational Therapy (OT) driving assessment involves two parts, an Off-Road Assessment and an On-Road Assessment. The Off-Road Assessment assesses your physical, cognitive and perceptual skills as they relate to driving. The On-Road Assessment involves a qualified driving instructor in a dual-controlled vehicle. Outcomes may include, driving retirement, passing with restrictions/vehicle modifications or passing without restrictions. On completion, a report is sent to the doctor, who then makes the final decision regarding driving ability. The costs of these assessments vary. To locate qualified OT Driving Assessors in your area contact Occupational Therapy Queensland on 07 3397 6744.



## GENERAL TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR DRIVING AND KEEP YOU SAFER FOR LONGER

- Honestly self-evaluate your driving ability regularly – use the questions on page 5 as cues.
- Adjust your driving habits to compensate for any changes you notice, e.g. slower to react/process information. E.g. Restrict yourself to the local area only; only drive during the day in fine weather; don't drive when tired or fatigued; avoid busy periods.
- Time your driving around your medications, e.g. blood pressure medications may make you drowsy in the afternoon, so drive in the morning only.
- Keep looking in the rear view mirror. Is there a line of drivers behind you? Driving too slowly/below the speed limit can cause a hazard too – pull over to the side of the road and wait for cars to pass.
- Consider a smaller vehicle. Our vision is affected as we age and our perception of space may also change – a smaller car allows for more accurate control.
- Consider changing transmissions from a manual to an automatic – multi-tasking is a part of driving, simplify things by removing one aspect.
- Consider audible reversing sensors and extended side mirrors to help compensate for reduced neck movement – let the car work for you!
- The older we get the frailer we become. Choose the right vehicle for you. Cars with high safety ratings will help protect you in the event of an accident.
- Consider attending Driver Refresher courses with a qualified driving instructor to give you practical tips to remain safe on the road.
- Contact your GP if you think a medical condition is affecting your driving ability.



## FOR FAMILY

Many older drivers will self-regulate their driving or adopt compensatory behaviours according to their changing capacity, which reduces their crash risk. For example, avoid driving on highways or at busy times of day, avoid night driving or driving long distances.

There are a small proportion of drivers who, despite changes in driving ability - or a cancelled licence - will continue to drive. This may be due to damage in the area of the brain that helps us reason and understand cause and effect - for example, due to stroke or dementia. For this group, carers, family members and health professionals will need to act.

Alternatively, it may be due to difficulty accepting and adapting to change. Driving means different things to different people – the loss of a driver's licence can result in feelings of isolation, anger, reduced confidence and self-worth.

The way this subject is approached can have a significant effect on their acceptance.



## LETS TALK ABOUT IT

Addressing driving retirement with a loved one is never easy. Forced driving retirement can result in real feelings of loss and grief and should be approached with sensitivity.

- First decide who is the best person to initiate the topic. Sometimes it's not the person closest to the driver. Consider a doctor or church pastor, someone they hold in high regard.
- Focus on the health issue as the reason for driving retirement. It's often easier to accept driving retirement for medical reasons rather than as a reflection on the person themselves. People are often proud of their driving history.
- Use 'I' language not 'you' language, e.g. 'I am concerned about your recent driving because...', rather than, 'Your driving is worrying me'. This changes the focus from accusations to empathy for their well-being.
- Try to give specific examples at the time you notice them, 'I was worried when you seemed to miss that car coming onto the roundabout'.
- Acknowledge a successful driving history – people should be congratulated for this.
- It's important to acknowledge that giving up driving is difficult. It's one of the bigger changes in life – remind them that they have successfully coped with similar changes in the past.
- Focus on the positives such as reduced cost of owning and maintaining a car (registration, servicing, petrol, insurance, depreciation). You can even work out the costs and present it in dollars spent weekly.
- Normalise the situation. Most people will have to stop driving at some stage in their lives due to health or age-related issues.



## LETS TALK ABOUT IT

- Focus on the 'responsibility' of driving and road safety.
- Try to provide other transport options and offer support
- Focus on the 'responsibility' of driving and road safety.
- Try to provide other transport options and offer support to help maintain weekly activities with these new transport options if possible.
- Be patient and consistent.

If the conversation is not going well and a driver continues to drive against advice, this may be due to the neurological damage that causes dementia symptoms, where the person lacks insight or self-awareness. It can be difficult, it is not impossible, to reason with a person with dementia if this area of the brain has been affected by the disease. As a last resort, a person with dementia will need help retiring from driving such as taking away the keys or selling the car. Mobility and access to social supports and hobbies continue to remain important for quality of life, so support in providing alternative transport options is particularly important.



# PREPARING FOR DRIVING RETIREMENT

## – stay involved and active

Just as we plan for retirement from work, planning for driving retirement will make the process much easier. We know that driving retirement is a big change. This may mean that routines and activities need to change too to remain active and involved in life.

- Consider doing two activities on the one day, e.g. grocery shopping and paying bills.
- Consider replacing familiar activities that require transport with new activities or hobbies.
- Order groceries online and get them delivered.
- Start using alternative transport options whilst you are still driving. Ask a friend if you can car pool to church one Sunday or investigate free or discounted community transport options.
- Call TransLink to help you plan a trip via public transport (bus, train or ferry) on 13 12 30 or visit their website on [www.translink.com.au](http://www.translink.com.au).
- Ask your GP about a taxi subsidy card – you may be eligible for up to 50% off of your fare up to the value of \$25 per trip. For information go to, [www.qld.gov.au/disability/out-and-about/taxi-subsidy](http://www.qld.gov.au/disability/out-and-about/taxi-subsidy) or contact the Department of Transport and Main Roads on 1300 134 755.
- Council cabs in most Brisbane suburbs can offer a door-to-door service that will take you shopping for between \$1.00 - \$3.00 each way. Call 07 3403 2227 to book a council cab. Visit [www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/traffic-transport/public-transport/special-taxi-services/council-cabs](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/traffic-transport/public-transport/special-taxi-services/council-cabs) for more information.
- Consider relocating to an area that has better and permanent transport options.



## OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

The following contacts may be used to help further assess your driving capacity, help you drive safer for longer or provide further information on older persons driving safety. They are not a comprehensive list.

### Occupational Therapy Driving Assessors

- [www.otaus.com.au/divisions/qld](http://www.otaus.com.au/divisions/qld)

### Refresher Driver Courses

- All Up To Speed Driving School - 07 3261 1112
- Driver Education and Training Services - 07 3281 5331
- RACQ Drive Assist - 07 3361 2382 or 1800 680 039

## DETAILS FOR ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT OPTIONS

### Council Cabs

- [www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/traffic-transport/public-transport/special-taxi-services/council-cabs](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/traffic-transport/public-transport/special-taxi-services/council-cabs)

### QLD Ambulance

- Provides non-emergency client transport for north **Brisbane, Maryborough and Bundaberg 07 3632 9932**. They can provide transport for medical appointments, shopping and general activities.

### Community Transport Options:

- Information and advice sourced from the Transport and Development Solutions Alliance via [www.tdsa.org.au/resources/directories](http://www.tdsa.org.au/resources/directories).

### Community Transport Northern Western Suburbs Brisbane:

- [www.communify.org.au/service-directory/domestic-and-travel-service](http://www.communify.org.au/service-directory/domestic-and-travel-service) or 07 3510 2741.

### Community Health Workers:

- Case managers associated with Community Care Packages may assist in coordinating alternative transport options.

The organisations listed are not directly affiliated with Alzheimer's Queensland and as such Alzheimer's Queensland does not endorse any programs or products offered by them.

Remember: A balance between maintaining community mobility by driving and the safety of self and other road users is important and has significant legal and insurance implications.





**Dementia Help Line - 24hrs / 7days  
free call: 1800 639 331**

[www.alzheimersonline.org](http://www.alzheimersonline.org)

Disclaimer: The information provided in this booklet is a public service guide by Alzheimer's Queensland. Please consult your Doctor/Physician for more information.



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**Working together in the community**