

Driving and Dementia

Driving and independence are linked closely in our society. For this reason, people with dementia may be extremely reluctant to give up the responsibility of driving. Driving can also be a very demanding activity requiring a great deal of concentration, coordination and decision-making. Some individuals can recognise their decreased driving ability and will accept their limitations and cease driving as a welcome relief. Others may deny there is a problem or simply be unaware of their driving difficulties. While this creates a sensitive situation, it is a problem that should not be ignored because of the risk that unsafe driving poses to both the person with dementia and other drivers and pedestrians.

Warning Signs

- Confusion between left and right
- Becoming lost on familiar routes
- Stopping or slowing down at green lights
- Uncoordinated use of the brake/accelerator
- Stopping or changing lanes inappropriately
- Driving too slowly
- Having small accidents
- Lack of recognition of traffic mistakes

It is important to remember that because driving is a well-learned skill, a person with dementia can still appear to be driving well when relying on habitual responses. However, if the traffic changes suddenly and the situation demands a new response, the person with dementia may not react appropriately or safely.

Approaching the person

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. Ideally, drivers will self-evaluate their driving skills and plan for driving retirement just as they plan for vocational retirement. However, this is difficult for people with dementia. When you are thinking about approaching your loved one to discuss driving safety, first decide who will be the best person to initiate the topic. Consider a doctor or church pastor, someone they hold in high regard. A letter from a trusted GP may act as an 'official' reminder.

- 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.
- Acknowledge that giving up driving is difficult and normalise the situation. Most people will have to stop driving at some stage due to health or age-related issues.
- Use 'I' language rather than 'you' language. E.g. I am concerned about your recent driving because...', rather than, 'you missed the red light back there'.
- Remember to be patient and consistent. Driving is a large part of a person's life and giving it up is extremely difficult.

Licence cancellation

Discuss your concerns about the person driving with both the person with dementia and their doctor. Ask the doctor to submit a medical certificate to Queensland Transport stating that the person with dementia is unfit to drive. This is particularly relevant if the person with dementia has difficulty understanding the impact of their driving behaviour on the safety of themselves and other road users. If the doctor is in doubt, your relative should be referred to an Occupational Therapist for a comprehensive driver assessment. Alzheimer's Association of Queensland offers Occupational Therapy Driving assessments.

The doctor may be concerned about challenging the independence of the person with dementia and preserving the doctor-patient relationship. These important considerations need to be balanced against ensuring the safety of the person with dementia, their passengers and other road users.

Life after Driving Retirement

Enquire about community transport options. In certain circumstances and under set criteria, the person with dementia may be eligible for entitlements to assist their mobility. Contact Council Cabs, QLD Ambulance or a general practitioner about a taxi subsidy card.

Enquire about alternative transport options. Case managers associated with home care packages may be able to assist with identifying appropriate transport options in your local area. Community agencies such as senior citizens centres may provide transport for shopping and medical and hospital appointments.

Alternatively, you may decide to sell the family car and set the funds aside for taxi expenses and public transport.