

Years Behind the Wheel Does Not Always Mean Safer Driving

By Susan Peters, Volunteer Attorney

Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors

Winter provides many challenges to all of us driving in Michigan and can force us to pause and take stock of our driving ability. Older drivers, however, should question whether it is only the season that is affecting their driving confidence.

Driving safely is important at any age. For older drivers, though, it has added significance. Common symptoms of aging can have an important impact on one's driving at any time of year. Changes in vision can have the most serious effect on driver safety. General visual acuity as well as night vision are both safety concerns. Some drivers experience a decrease in their reasoning and decision making ability as they age. Others experience decreased motor skills and increased reaction times or confusion and impaired memory.

These threats to driver safety can be a result of the natural aging process, a side effect of medication or another situation that can be easily corrected. A change in eyeglasses, fine-tuning a medication or adding one of the many options available to retro-fit vehicles are examples of "easy fixes."

Issues surrounding driver safety and aging are receiving increased attention as our driving population ages. In 2007, 15% of all licensed drivers in Michigan were classified as "older drivers." Based on national studies, that population is expected to double over the next 30 years. The greatest safety concern for older drivers stems not so much from the number of crashes older drivers are involved in as it does from their increased likelihood of being injured or killed in a crash. The inherent frailty of older drivers significantly reduces their chances of surviving an accident. In addition to a driver's personal safety the safety of those around them – pedestrians, passengers, and other drivers – remains a significant concern.

Changes in driving ability can slowly creep upon us as we age and as a result are not always obvious to us. AARP, as one of the organizations at the forefront of the effort to increase older driver safety, suggests the following as Warning Signs that should cause one to consider an objective assessment of their ability to drive safely. Think about these—do any apply to you?

1. Feeling uncomfortable and nervous or fearful while driving
2. Dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs, etc.
3. Difficulty staying in the lane of travel
4. Getting lost
5. Trouble paying attention to signals, road signs and pavement markings
6. Slower response to unexpected situations
7. Medical conditions or medications that may be affecting the ability to handle the car safely
8. Frequent “close calls” (i.e. almost crashing)
9. Trouble judging gaps in traffic at intersections and on highway entrance/exit ramps
10. Other drivers honking at you and instances when you are angry at other drivers
11. Friends or relatives not wanting to drive with you
12. Difficulty seeing sides of the road when looking straight ahead
13. Easily distracted or having a hard time concentrating while driving
14. Having a hard time turning around to check over your shoulder while backing up or changing lanes
15. Frequent traffic tickets or “warnings” by traffic or law enforcement officers in the last year or two

If one’s driving is questioned they should not automatically assume they will have to retire their license. If they are not ready to enter “driving retirement” just yet there may be ways to help them drive more safely and drive longer. A routine driver’s test is the best way to discover whether these concerns warrant further consideration. Simple vision adjustments or cataract surgery could go a long way to improve one’s quality of life as well as driving safety. Special equipment – such as larger rear view mirrors or devices to make it easier to steer or operate the foot pedals—or simply limiting driving times or destinations, might be all that is required to drive with confidence again.

Nationally, statistics indicate the rate of traffic fatalities increases slightly after age 65 and significantly after age 75. States have taken a variety of approaches in responding to these figures – requiring accelerated license renewal periods and mandatory road tests for persons over a certain age,

for example. In Michigan, drivers 65 or older are generally required to renew their license in person when it expires. In addition to the standard vision test a written knowledge test may also be required in certain situations. The Michigan Secretary of State (888-767-6424 or www.michigan.gov/sos) provides copies of the Michigan Driver's Handbook and practice tests to those who wish to study for their drivers test.

Michigan allows others to request the Michigan Secretary of State conduct a special Driver Evaluation when there are concerns about an individual's driving. Most often these requests are submitted by law officers, however referrals may also be made by health care professionals, family, friends and concerned citizens. To make such a request an individual can obtain the necessary forms from the Michigan Secretary of State (888-767-6424 or www.michigan.gov/sos). The Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors (800-347-5297) is also a great resource for those seeking to understand their rights and the resources available to them surrounding questions of driving. If one's license has been limited, suspended or revoked, and the offending condition has been remedied, there are procedures in place to have the decision reviewed. The Legal Hotline for Michigan Seniors can assist individuals in understanding whether such a request is appropriate and if so in seeking a review. Anyone 60 or over can call the Hotline -- Monday through Thursday, 9 – 5 to set up an appointment to talk with an attorney, usually the same day.

If you have concerns about your driving fitness you may wish to take a classroom refresher course such as the AARP Driver Safety Program which is specifically designed for drivers 50 or older. You can also order the AARP Driver Assessment Guide – “Older Driver Skill Assessment and Resource Guide: Creating Mobility Choices” (888-227-7669 or www.aarp.org/life/drive). The University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute developed and distributes the Driving Decisions Workbook, a self-screening instrument for older drivers as well as maintains SAFERDriving : The Enhanced Driving Decision Workbook, an interactive website for self-screening older drivers (<http://um-saferdriving.org>). In addition you may want to seek further information on topics like behind-the-wheel assessment, counseling from private or public sources, remedial training, and/or adaptive equipment from an occupational therapist. Remember, although we take driving a vehicle for granted—almost as a right—it is not a right but a privilege. And that privilege can be taken away. Drive safely.