

Driving and Dementia

When a person has been driving for many years they may not want to stop. It is, however, illegal for anyone whose driving has become unsafe through health reasons to continue to drive. Many people with dementia are able to drive safely for some time after diagnosis, although they are subject to legal safeguards. As dementia progresses, the ability to drive safely will inevitably be lost and law demands that driving must stop.

For experienced drivers, driving may seem to be a largely automatic activity. In fact, driving is a complicated task that requires a split-second combination of complex thought processes and manual skills. To drive, a person needs to be able to make sense of and respond to everything they see, to 'read the road', to follow road signs, to anticipate and react quickly to the actions of other road users, to take appropriate action to avoid accidents and to remember where they are going.

As dementia progresses, there are serious effects on memory, responses are slower, perception and the ability to perform even simple tasks. It is not surprising, therefore, that people with dementia eventually lose the ability to drive. The decision to give up driving should, if possible, be made by the person with dementia themselves. If they need to be persuaded to give up or actually prevented from driving this will need to be done very tactfully.

When to stop driving?

A diagnosis of dementia is not in itself a sufficient reason to prevent someone from driving. What matters, from both a legal and a practical point of view, is whether or not an individual is still able to drive safely.

Many people with dementia retain learned skills and are able to drive safely for some time after diagnosis.

Ultimately, however, their condition will deteriorate and they will have to stop driving. The stage at which this happens will be different for each person with dementia.

Regular review of a person's continuing ability to drive is needed, by law and on an individual basis. Some research suggests that people with dementia are significantly more likely to be involved in a motor vehicle accident than other people. Anyone with a diagnosis of dementia should stop driving as soon as they personally pose an unacceptably high level of risk on the roads.



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Reducing the risks

Short drives on familiar roads at quiet times of day generally present fewer problems than long, unfamiliar journeys or those in heavy traffic. People on certain types of medication, such as night sedation or drugs for anxiety, depression or other psychiatric disorders, may find that their driving ability is affected. It is worth asking your GP if anything can be done about this.

Licensing requirements

Check with the Traffic Department

Insurance

Check with your own insurance company as to their policy.

Encouragement to stop driving

Some people with dementia decide quite independently that they no longer want to drive. Others need more encouragement from carers, family members or friends. The person's doctor may also be able to help.

When you are trying to encourage someone to give up driving it is important to acknowledge that they may find this very difficult. They may have relied on driving as their main means of transport for much of their lives.

Some people with dementia will respond to the harsh argument that the risks of having an accident, in which they, or other people, may be injured or even killed, are now too great for them to continue driving.

Giving up driving will seem especially hard if physical problems make it difficult to use public transport. In some areas, limited public transport means that it is very difficult to get about without a car. If the person with dementia has been the only driver, the decision will also have serious implications for their partner.

If a person has to give up driving they will probably feel unhappy about losing some of their independence.

Encouraging them to take charge of their new transport arrangements.

When persuasion fails

- For some people with dementia, no amount of persuasion can convince them that it is no longer safe for them to drive.
- Eventually, as their disease progresses, they will probably forget all about driving. However, until they do, driving can become an extremely trying issue for all concerned.
- If it becomes necessary to prevent someone from driving, it may be worth considering the following strategies, which have worked for others in this situation:
 - Suggest that public transport or a taxi may be more convenient.
 - Pass driving responsibility on to others
 - Hide the car keys (including the spare set).
 - Reduce need to drive, e.g. things delivered to home.
 - Keep the car in a different place so that it is no longer visible.
 - Immobilise the car by asking a mechanic to remove the main distributor lead and tucking it away inside the engine.
 - Suggest that you drive when you go out together because you need the practice.
 - Sell the car, perhaps having first arranged for it to break down, so that it needs to be taken to the garage.
 - If you are a driver, replace the car with a new one that is a different model and colour, which the person with dementia will not recognize.

Please contact the DEMENTIA SA Office

Support | Awareness | Education | Counseling | Training | Resource centre | Advocacy
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National Helpline 0860 MEMORY / 0860 636 679

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