

A Difficult Conversation: Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia, and Driving



Today there are an estimated 5 million people in the U.S. who have been diagnosed with some form of dementia, Alzheimer's disease being the most common form. If you have a loved one who has been diagnosed with dementia, you'll struggle with a number of challenges as a caregiver – medical, legal, financial, and daily care. You will also no doubt have to decide when that person should no longer drive.

Most information about patients with dementia warns against driving. Even in the early stages of dementia or mild cognitive impairment, one or more functions of the brain can be affected, which can pose a risk when driving. Reaction time can be slowed. We worry about not only mechanical confusion, but the possibility of getting lost. Hearing, vision, and depth perception are also factors.

As a caregiver, you may know that the best decision would be for your loved one to stop driving, but how do you even begin to have that conversation? And how do you convince mom or dad to stop driving when they don't see or understand the problem. It's not unusual for a parent to say something like, "I've been driving longer than you've been alive. I do just fine." Anger or frustration may result on both sides from these conversations, but often there is no immediate resolution. This is a conversation that neither party wants to have, and there really are no winners.

Assessing Driving Abilities

Once someone has been diagnosed with dementia, it is critically important to be on the lookout for changes in their driving skills, attention span, or distance perception. These changes may happen gradually over time. Family members are often in the best position to monitor such changes, but a spouse may not have the ability to be unbiased. It is not unusual for a spouse to act as "co-pilot." They know their loved one shouldn't be driving, but feel that as long as they can help navigate and watch the road, he or she is still doing well enough to continue driving. To stop driving might very well mean the end of independence for both of them. They may concede that they no longer drive at night, or rationalize that they only drive a few blocks, to the bank, grocery store, doctor, etc., and deny any of the problems we see in the warning signs listed below.

Opening the Lines of Communication

Once a diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment or dementia is made, family members may want to start a dialogue about the eventual need to stop driving. If your loved one can understand that there will come a time when that needs to happen, it may make it easier to transition over time. As a family, you may be able to start providing rides for longer trips, or to less familiar destinations. Pair this with lunch out, or a shopping trip to make it more enjoyable. Focus less on your loved one's need for a driver, and more on increased time spent together.

If your loved one is fully resistant to the idea of giving up driving, ask your physician for help discussing this subject. He may be willing to take on the role of "the bad guy." While the patient may still be resistant to the idea, she may listen more openly when the advice to discontinue driving comes from a person they view as an authority. That opens the door for a family conversation in which you can be the voice of reason.

Providing Compassion and Support

The diagnosis of dementia is a scary one. The patient realizes that their life is going to be forever changed, and they have no control over when or how those changes happen. Take into consideration the feelings of fear, anger, and grief that your loved one may be experiencing. He/She will rightfully want to maintain control of their life for as long as possible. Asking permission to help them make important decisions, including the decision about driving, may give you some indication of their receptiveness to your input. Let them know that you are there to support them, not to take control. Assure them that you want to help them find the balance between maintaining independence and ensuring their safety, and the safety of others.

Knowing When It's Time to Discontinue Driving

Healthcare professionals may be able to arrange for a Comprehensive Driving Evaluation through a local rehab program or independent testing provider. This evaluation can determine if driving can continue, or whether restrictions need to be made. Another option is to have a driving test administered by your local Highway Patrol or motor vehicle licensing agency. Unlike the Comprehensive Driving Evaluation, this test will result in a "pass" or "fail."

Taking away the keys or driver's license, or selling or disabling the car should only be done as a last resort. To someone in the early stages of dementia, these actions may seem abrupt, extreme, disrespectful, and punitive. And people with mild dementia can get around those actions by driving without a license, fixing the car, or buying a new one. Take the time to discuss and prepare for this event with your loved one, and if necessary, enlist help from your physician or other healthcare professionals.

WARNING SIGNS FOR DRIVERS WITH DEMENTIA

- Decrease in confidence while driving
- Difficulty in turning to see when backing up
- Riding the brake
- Easily distracted while driving
- Others often honk their horns
- Incorrect signaling
- Hitting curbs
- Scrapes or dents in car or garage
- Increased agitation when driving
- Difficulty parking within a confined space
- Failure to notice roadside activity
- Failure to notice traffic signs
- Trouble navigating turns
- Driving at inappropriate speeds
- Not anticipating dangerous situations
- Uses a "co-pilot"
- Bad judgement when making left turns
- Near misses
- Delayed response to unexpected situations
- Moving into the wrong lane
- Difficulty maintaining lane position
- Confusion at exits
- Ticketed moving violations or warnings
- Getting lost in familiar places
- Car accident(s)
- Failure to stop at sign or red light
- Confusing the gas and brake pedal *
- Stopping in traffic for no apparent reason *
- Other noticed signs
- * Needs to stop driving immediately

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For more information, SarahCare suggests a resource guide, "At the Crossroads: Family Conversations About Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia, and Driving," published and distributed by The Hartford. You can find this and other comprehensive brochures online at www.thehartford.com/publications