Practical solutions for the driving dilemma

By Elizabeth Dugan, PhD

Part One of a two-part series

A particular kind of accident has become very common: an older person, driving on a weekday close to home, is involved in a collision while making a left turn.

This happened to my own mother when I was writing my book The Driving Dilemma, and fortunately no one was hurt. But it was a wake-up call for my family.

After 50 years of accident-free driving, my mom provided an all-too-personal case study with which to illustrate a problem facing many older drivers and their families. And one good thing came out of it. I can attest that the steps outlined in my book really do work (more on this next month).

Contrary to popular myths

To begin any discussion about older drivers, it’s important for everyone to be aware of the facts:

- **Age is not the key issue.** When it comes to determining one’s driving fitness, what matters more than a person’s age is his or her ability to see, think and move. Some people in their 90s and even beyond are more fit for driving than some people in their 50s or 60s.

- **Older drivers are pretty safe generally.** The accident rate for even the oldest group of drivers is lower than for teenagers and young adults. Older people tend to drive less, wear seat belts, rarely drive while intoxicated and they don’t get speeding tickets. But when they do have an accident, they are more likely to be hurt or killed.

- **Most older drivers avoid risks.** As a group, they tend to be “self-regulators.” They typically avoid driving in bad weather, in heavy traffic and at night. But some do not use self-protective measures because of their own denial or impaired thinking.

- **They want to keep driving.** Most older Americans live in areas where public transportation is unavailable or limited. They associate the ability to drive a car with their personal freedom and autonomy. For a growing number of older people, giving up driving has become a new life milestone. And research suggests that most of us will outlive our driving ability by from 7 to 10 years.

**Before you speak out**

If you are worried about an older relative’s driving ability, here are some things to consider—before you start a conversation on this subject with your loved one.

- **Put yourself in his/her shoes.** Give some thought to what driving represents to your older relative’s or friend’s sense of identity. What difficulties might arise from being without a car? Will she or he be able to keep up with friends and important activities?

- **Anticipate emotions.** Changing one’s driving status can be scary and complicated for older drivers. Will your relative be sad? Angry? Resentful? Relieved? Will he or she feel vulnerable? You may see your conversation as being just about driving, but your loved one may see it as a life-and-death issue. Many older people worry about losing control. “Will I become a burden?” “Am I dying?” These thoughts may be on your relative’s mind, yet remain unspoken.

- **Plan ahead.** Timing can be a key factor. Start the conversation with your relative when and where you will not be interrupted or have to rush. Sit comfortably with everyone at the same eye level.

If more than one sibling is taking part in the discussion, don’t let it seem like you’re ganging up on your parent or friend. And don’t rehash old arguments. This should be a conversation about your love and concern for the older driver’s safety and the facts relating to his or her driving fitness.

Easing the transition

We all have essential needs for transportation. Getting food, supplies and medicines and going to doctor’s appointments and social events are the bare minimum.

As family members help an older relative who needs to restrict or give up driving, here are some suggestions:

- **Do some research.** Find out what alternatives for transportation are available in your relative’s community. He or she may not use them all, but it’s good to have some choices.

  Bear in mind that a single option is unlikely to meet all of your relative’s needs. Chances are you will need to patch together several such as riding with family members and friends, using accessibility programs for seniors, or taking a bus, taxi or other car service.

- **One talk won’t do the trick.** The transition from unlimited driving to driving retirement can be a lengthy process that will likely involve many conversations with an older relative or friend. It’s impossible to anticipate everything that will come up in a single talk. Be aware also that the options your thought everyone agreed on during one discussion may need to be revisited later.

**Online resources**

Here are a few links to helpful online resources.

www.seniordrivers.com
www.aarp.org/drive
www.itnamerica.org
www.caring.com

Information for those who are worried about a relative’s dementia and driving can be found at www.thehartford.com/alzheimers.

Check out the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists at www.driver-ed.org.


—Adapted from the author’s book “The Driving Dilemma.” On this page in Part Two next month, we will talk about assessing an older person’s fitness to drive.