



“Driving for Older Adults,” by Gail Schuster, LCSW

There are many “hot” topics in the press today about seniors, but few are as emotionally charged as driving. The freedom and independence that many of us yearned to earn as teens is equally as important to us as senior adults. Safety remains the primary issue, but the factors contributing to safety dramatically change over time. For teenagers, safety is related to the ability to stay focused and non-distracted and to practice the driving skills that are so new to us. As senior adults, however, we are not as easily distracted by visual and auditory stimuli and have had years of practice. **Safety concerns**

for seniors driving a motor vehicle lie in the changes in physical and cognitive abilities that we experience.

The good news is that if we pay attention to changes in eyesight, physical reflexes, alertness, and physical fitness, we may be able to adjust our driving habits and remain safe drivers on the road.

You are never too old for Driver’s Ed. Many agencies offer Mature Driving courses, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) offers a Driving Assessment Clinic (call 205-325-8646 for more information). Also, review our self-assessment (on the following page) from time-to-time to gauge whether you should try walking, carpooling, public transit, and other forms of transportation to reduce or replace your time behind the wheel. Remember CJFS offers transportation through our Buz-A-Bus and Just Like Family programs.

Most importantly, check-in regularly with your doctor. If you are over 60, you should see an eye doctor every year, and you should review your medication list with your general physician to be informed if or how your medications affect your eyesight, reaction time, and feelings about driving. If loved ones are concerned, knowing that your doctor has given you the green-light to continue driving may alleviate their anxiety.

Mature Driver Self-Evaluation

Area of Concern	Do you have trouble...	If you said, yes...
Eyesight changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading signs easily? • Recognizing someone you know from across the street? • Seeing street markings, other cars, and people walking - especially at dawn, dusk and at night? • Handling headlight glare at night? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Make sure you always wear your glasses and that the prescription is current. ✓ Keep your windshield, mirrors and headlights clean. ✓ Make sure that your headlights are working and aimed correctly. ✓ Sit high enough in your seat so you can see the road for at least 10 feet in front of your vehicle. ✓ If you are 60 or older, see an eye doctor every year.
Muscular changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking over your shoulder to change lanes? • Moving your foot from the gas to the brake pedal? • Turning the steering wheel? • Walking less than a block a day? • Going up or down stairs because you have pain in your knees, legs or ankles? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Check with your doctor about physical therapy, medicine, stretching exercises, or a walking or fitness program. ✓ Know that an automatic transmission, power steering and brakes, and other special equipment can make it easier for you to drive your vehicle and use the foot pedals. ✓ Reduce your driver's side blind spot by moving your mirrors. ✓ Watch for flashing lights of emergency vehicles. ✓ Listen for sounds outside your vehicle.
Alertness changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paying attention? Do you... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Feel confused by traffic signs, and people and cars in traffic? ○ Take medicine that makes you sleepy? ○ Get dizzy, or have seizures or losses of consciousness? ○ React slowly to normal driving situations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ask your doctor if your health or side effects from your medicine can affect your driving. ✓ Take routes that you know. ✓ Try to drive during the day (avoid rush hour). ✓ Keep a safe distance between you and the car ahead of you. ✓ Always scan the road while you are driving so that you are ready for any problems and can plan your actions.