

Family Conversations with Older Drivers

What to do when an elderly loved one is no longer safe behind the wheel.



About NuevaCare

NuevaCare provides non-medical home care services to seniors who need assistance with their activities of daily living.

Our services include:

- . Medication reminders
- . Respite care
- . Grocery shopping
- . Errands & household duties
- . Transportation
- . Supervise walking and fall prevention
- . Light housekeeping
- . Laundry/ironing & changing bed linens
- . Socialization & companionship
- . Alzheimer's/Dementia support
- . Ambulation assistance
- . Incontinence support
- . Bathing & grooming supervision
- . Meal planning & preparation
- . Hygiene assistance
- . Dressing assistance

Martin applauded his 88-year-old mother's energy and independence. Engaged and mentally sharp, she continued to attend adult education classes, participate in church activities and regularly visited family and friends.

Still, he found himself worried about her safety when driving. It was the same anxiety he felt when his teenage daughter started driving. His mother drove her 15-year-old Cadillac everywhere, but had recently been involved in a couple of minor fender benders. In addition, he knew that she continued to drive on major roadways even though she admitted to feeling increasing anxiety over entering fast moving traffic.

He felt the time was quickly approaching when she would have to quit driving. It was a conversation he knew he had to initiate, one that needed to take place sooner rather than

later. He was not sure what to say or, most importantly, how to say it in a way that would not insult her and yet have the desired effect.

Constructing a Game Plan

Experts believe that while any discussions on driving are likely to be emotional for all parties, they should not be put off. Suggested is the following:

- . Be prepared to have multiple conversations. This should not be viewed as a one shot deal. Ongoing and candid conversations are recommended in order to establish a pattern of open dialogue and give the senior time to consider the situation without the strain of necessarily changing behaviors immediately.
- . Start with appropriate conversation openers. Rather than tell a parent, you need to stop driving, it is more effective to begin by talking about the importance of safety and

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The rate of fatalities involving drivers over 75 is on par with teenage drivers. Seniors have a higher risk of being involved in an accident for every mile they drive.

- health, other options that may be available to help them get around, the dangers of certain road conditions, etc.
- Use mishaps or near misses or health changes as a lead in. For example, if they are taking a new medication that may make them less alert or sleepier, this should be discussed in terms of their need to limit their driving.
 - Observe the senior at the wheel. A conversation has more meaning when the senior's driving is experienced first hand. Seeing, for example, that the senior gets lost in familiar surroundings may be a reason in and of itself for them to stop driving.
 - Investigate the alternatives to driving. Many seniors will see this as the loss of independence and a blow to their social network. To make any decision more palatable, it is important to see what other options exist. Is there a bus or train line? Are there relatives who can drive? Can children increase their visits?
 - Discuss your concerns with a doctor. It's always easier to blame the doctor. A recommendation to stop driving that comes from the senior's doctor carries far more

- weight than when heard from adult children.
- Should there be initial resistance, suggest having them tested for an assessment of their driving skills. These tests are commonly administered by rehabilitation centers, hospitals and VAs.
 - Be supportive. Adult children need to understand this is more than just the loss of their car, but a clear blow to their freedom and independence. It is one more thing that they can no longer do. The transition can be a difficult one, and understanding is important.

And what if this fails to get the desired response? Experts say that if a high risk driver refuses to stop driving, the family may have no recourse but to get rid of the car or file down the keys.

Time to Stop Driving?

Getting mom or dad to stop driving, can often be extremely difficult. Hearing they should no longer drive is not something they want to hear. As a result, many will respond angrily.

The AARP suggests that, any families looking to do this, begin by holding ongoing conversations. A survey of older adults found that more than half said they followed the suggestions of others, with women generally more compliant than men. They may prefer to hear it from their spouse (or from their doctor) but will listen to their adult children.

The survey found that about one quarter of all seniors reported responding with sadness when spoken to about their driving. While they may agree with the assessment, they felt depressed at the thought of relinquishing this activity. After all, the implications are significant -- fewer trips outside the house, increase dependency on others, fewer social opportunities and the fear of being a burden to others.