

WHEN ADULTS CAN'T READ • IS POP TOO OLD TO DRIVE?

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I'M IN LOVE WITH MY CAR

**Young Girls:
Dying To Be Thin**

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SOUTH JERSEY'S ONLY FAMILY MAGAZINE

Hanging up the Car Keys

*Deciding it's just not
safe to drive –
ever again*



Many people consider driving key to independent living, a sign of mobility and freedom. For the elderly, the connection is even stronger – linking them to the world. So what do you do when you're afraid your aging parent is a danger behind the wheel? How do you prevent a tragedy without causing heartache?

Nearly 18 million drivers are over age 70, up from about 13 million a decade ago, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Even though statistics show that people over age 65 drive less frequently than younger people, statistics show they are most likely to die in car wrecks.

So the time may arrive when an adult child or a physician will want to sit down with an older person and discuss the safety of his or her continued driving. "Let's face it, this is not an easy topic to discuss," says Stephanie M. Mensch, Public Affairs Manager of AAA South

Jersey. "But starting conversations early about driver health may save some anguish in the long run."

Knowing for Sure

When an older person's ability to drive safely is in question, local programs can help. Fox Rehabilitation and Lourdes Health System both offer tests designed to measure a person's driving skill.

"Our mission is to keep our geriatric population as independent as possible and safely on the road as long as possible, so they can be optimal members of the community," explains Holly Alexander,

Director of the Fox Rehabilitation Driving Program.

At 83 years old, John DuBosque suffered heart problems and needed to have a pacemaker installed to control his heart rhythm. "The doctor told me I couldn't drive until I took that test. It was two-and-a-half hours, and it was a tough test," remembers John.

The Fox Rehab test is divided into two parts: an assessment performed in the client's home and a road test. "We look at upper and lower body strength, range of motion and reaction times," says Alexander. "We have a reaction timer that has a gas pedal and a brake pedal. It times how quickly a person can move his foot from the accelerator to the brake. We also evaluate vision, coordination and cognition, and everything from memory to multi-tasking to concentration and sustained attention."

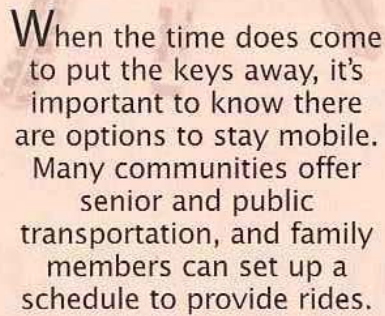
The road test is an hour behind the wheel in a dual-controlled vehicle with a brake pedal on the passenger's side. Test administrators try to plan a route that is conducive to the client's typical driving pattern, such as the doctor's office, hairdresser or supermarket.

DuBosque passed the test, which was a huge relief for both him and his wife. After driving for more than six decades, it would have been devastating for him to lose that freedom.

"He likes to drive locally, to church and stores," says John's wife, Florence. "It gives us independence. We can do things on our own, without depending on somebody having to do that for us."

Lourdes Health System also provides a two-part test, including a screening of cognitive skills such as memory and problem solving, mental flexibility, plus a measurement of upper and lower body strength and reaction times.

"If the patient passes that part of the test, then I schedule them for an on-the-road assessment," explains Kimberly Champion, occupational therapist at Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center in Camden. "They go on the road with a



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driving instructor who has a dual-controlled car."

Joy Strazzullo suffered a mini-stroke and spent about nine months in hospitals. Her doctor wanted her to have her driving tested to be sure she was still safe behind the wheel.

"I think the test was quite good, fair and reasonable," she says. "I'm 77 and have been driving since I was 17 years old. I never had a problem. I've been hit twice in the rear, but never had an accident that was caused by me. I have a clear record."

Many of the patients seen at the Lourdes program have experienced strokes or suffer from dementia or

Alzheimer's. For some stroke victims, adaptive equipment can help make up for a physical deficiency.

"The best indicator of how a person is going to perform is behind-the-wheel testing," says Alexander. "I always want to take somebody behind the wheel to see how they do. There are those occasions when we get through the first part of the evaluation and it's just not feasible and safe to go on the road. The patient is demonstrating too many deficits."

Often the biggest challenge people face as they get older is a loss of memory, says Champion. "You need to have a good memory in order to do these complex tasks that driving involves. If you can't remember where you're going, your attention can be distracted."

Both the Fox and Lourdes program require a referral from a physician, who will receive the final test results. It is then the doctor's responsibility to notify the state Motor Vehicle Commission if a change to the person's driving status is necessary. In some cases, a portion of the cost is covered by Medicare or secondary insurance. If not, testing can run between \$150 and \$225.

Stop Signs

Even without a formal testing program, families may see signs that a person should no longer drive. "Some indicators include frequent close calls, dents and dings on your car or on mailboxes or garage doors," says Nancy Thompson, spokesperson for AARP. "If there are a lot of other drivers who are honking at you or you get lost more than you used to, it may be time to reconsider your driving pattern. Traffic violations are also an indicator."

Strazzullo agrees, saying that she would know if her driving were beginning to falter. "I would know when to quit for myself. If I would start to get nervous in the car, or do crazy things in the car, I would stop driving, not only for my life, but for anybody out there I would come in contact with."

It may be time to limit driving or stop altogether if you:

- Feel nervous or fearful while driving
- Find dents or scrapes on your car
- Have difficulty staying in the lane of travel
- Get lost in familiar areas
- Hear other drivers honking at you

Source: AARP

When the time does come to put the keys away, it's important to know there are options to stay mobile. Many communities offer senior and public transportation, and family members can set up a schedule to provide rides.

"Our research shows that on any given day, four out of ten people who can't or don't drive are stuck at home when they would rather be elsewhere," says Thompson. "We need to be sure our neighborhoods are walkable and that alternative modes of transportation are easy to access. It is our responsibility to have alternatives for people who choose to give up driving." ■