

# *Safe Driving And Alzheimer's Disease*

## **A Special Report**



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## Safe Driving And Alzheimer's Disease

*Naomi was hopelessly lost. As she drove, absolutely nothing looked familiar. She noticed a fluttering in her stomach. She had to admit that she was in a lovely area, with large shade trees and beautiful lawn, but there were no houses where she could stop to ask directions. And the road seemed so narrow! She was starting to feel confused again, and there was nowhere to turn around. So she stopped the car and shifted into park.*

*Some time passed before a groundskeeper noticed the car on the golf course cart path. He called the police. A patrolman checked Naomi's identification and called her husband. The police officer then notified the state driver's licensing authority that Naomi should be retested.*

Knowing when and how to take away the keys to the car is one of the most troublesome issues facing families who have a loved one with Alzheimer's. As we age, our eyesight and hearing may worsen. Our depth perception plays tricks on us. Our reaction time slows. These elements of normal aging may interfere with our ability to drive a motor vehicle safely—but for someone with Alzheimer's, these normal processes are complicated by symptoms related to the disease's effect on the brain. In fact, studies show that a person with Alzheimer's disease is twice as likely to be involved in a motor vehicle accident than a healthy driver of the same age.

While a person in the early stages of Alzheimer's may retain the ability to drive a motor vehicle, as the disease progresses the time is likely to come when he or she is no

longer safe behind the wheel. At the same time, the person with Alzheimer's disease will cling to whatever sense of independence he or she can.

The American Psychiatric Association says that some Alzheimer's patients with moderate impairment, and *all* severely impaired patients, pose unacceptable risks to themselves and others behind the wheels of a motor vehicle. Those in some stages of the disease may be unable to drive even short distances safely. Depending on the individual, family members and others have a responsibility to assess the situation and, when necessary, step in and take away the keys.

## Warning Signs

How do you know when to restrict driving privileges in a person with Alzheimer's disease? Trust your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable riding with him or her—or letting your children ride along—you may have unconsciously decided that the time has come. Another indicator is the person's inability to follow a recipe or perform simple household tasks, because these types of activities require some of the same mental abilities necessary for safely operating a motor vehicle.

Deterioration in the ability to concentrate, as well as impairment of judgment seen in people who have Alzheimer's disease, add to the concern about such patients driving motor vehicles. According to the Alzheimer's Association, some things to watch for include the following:

### **1. Getting lost.**

Anyone can get lost in an unfamiliar area, but those with Alzheimer's disease may become disoriented and be unable to find their way in familiar locales.

### **2. Ignoring traffic signals.**

Failure to notice or obey stop signs, traffic lights, or other highway markers may mean the driver didn't notice them, or that the driver has lost the ability to associate the sign with its meaning. He or she may have seen the sign, but not know what it means.

**3. Lack of judgment.**

Inability to estimate the speed of oncoming traffic, deciding whether to stop for a yellow light or slide through the intersection, or becoming confused at a four-way stop sign are some examples of poor judgment while driving. Being slow to make decisions—or making poor ones—when driving can result in accidents that can harm the driver as well as others on the road.

**4. Driving too fast or too slow.**

Erratic driving at inappropriate speeds can indicate a lack of concentration, as well as poor physical coordination. It may also indicate poor judgment.

**5. Anger and confusion.**

You don't have to have Alzheimer's to experience road rage. Frustration during driving can make anyone flustered or angry. If the driver has Alzheimer's, however, watch for frequent occurrences of anger or confusion, as well as inappropriate or exaggerated reactions, while driving.

## **Taking Away the Car Keys**

If your family member's ability to drive is impaired, you have a moral responsibility to take action to keep him or her off the road. However, accomplishing this goal may not be easy. Any suggestion that car keys be relinquished could be met with resistance, frustration, anger, or hostility—especially when it comes from a family member who may already be assistance with activities of daily living like bathing, dressing, and meal preparation.

### **Ask the Doctor**

Many Alzheimer's families turn to the loved one's physician for help with the issue. Your loved one may more easily accept advice not to drive from a health care professional with whom he or she has an established a trusting relationship. For one thing, a doctor is often seen as an authority figure. For another, such a third party can often discuss the situation objectively and dispassionately, with less chance of offending your loved one. Many doctors understand the need for this intervention and are willing to comply with requests of this nature from family members. In some cases, doctors will write the words "Do Not Drive" on a prescription slip. In others, you may need to ask the doctor to file a request for re-examination with the state driver's licensing authority.

## **Contact the State Licensing Authority**

All states have systems to require retesting of persons with mental or physical impairments. However, state laws and re-examination processes vary. They may include medical evaluation as well as written and road tests. Laws also vary concerning who is authorized to request re-examination. They may include police officers, judges, state's attorneys, physicians, family members, neighbors, friends, or other drivers. In some states, all older drivers must take driving tests for annual renewals. Check with your state's driver's licensing authority to see what rules and procedures exist for revoking driver's licenses for impaired drivers.

If your loved one's driver's license is revoked, he or she should get a state-issued photo identification card to use for check cashing, air travel, and other uses.

## Protecting Insurance Coverage

Even with a doctor's advice not to drive or a driver's license revocation, a person with Alzheimer's may still get behind the wheel. He or she may forget that driving is no longer allowed—or stubbornness, anger, or frustration may encourage him or her to grab the keys and hit the road. If that happens and an accident occurs, serious consequences may result which go beyond the risk of personal injury or death to the driver, passengers, or others.

For example, although some state laws require insurance companies to honor claims involving insured motor vehicles even if driven by an unlicensed driver, an insurance claim can be challenged. Insurance coverage may be cancelled and future applications for motor vehicle insurance may be denied. In some states, insurance companies can cancel policies if a driver's license is revoked, regardless of whether an accident has happened or not. Should a driver without coverage become involved in an accident, his or her assets will be at risk from claims by accident victims for property damage or personal injury.

These issues are particularly important for an unimpaired spouse of a person with Alzheimer's disease, because insurance cancellation will jeopardize the healthy spouse's insurability. Acceptance under a new policy may be difficult because of the healthy spouse's advanced age. Additionally, the new policy may cost much more than the previous one. State insurance laws vary, and some states have regulations pertaining to such situations.

An option is for the impaired driver to exclude himself or herself from the policy, enabling the unimpaired spouse to continue insurance coverage. But if the excluded driver drives anyway, a claim for personal injury or property damage to the driver's car may not be honored to the full extent of the policy's limits. (Liability claims by others would likely be paid, however.) If that happens, the policy would most likely be canceled.

## Action Steps for Family Members

If your loved one still has a desire to drive, regardless of driver's license status or doctor's orders, family members can take steps to prevent an impaired driver from operating the car. Here are six steps you can take:

### **1. Hide the car keys.**

If the car remains in the family, someone must control access to all copies of the keys. Lock them in a safe place unknown to the impaired driver.

### **2. Replace the car key.**

If the impaired driver resists or refuses to hand over his or her set of keys, quietly replace the car key with one that looks like it, but that doesn't work in the vehicle.

### **3. Sell the car.**

If the car won't be driven, it makes sense to sell it. However, many Americans love their cars; some even name them the way they would a dog or cat. If your loved one is attached to his or her motor vehicle, your suggestion to sell it may meet strong objection, even if the impaired driver seems to understand that driving is no longer allowed. If the loved one insists on keeping the car, or is comforted by seeing it in the garage or driveway, you can disable the car so it can't be driven.

**4. Remove the tires**

Removing the tires will disable the vehicle, but in some residential areas, parking a car on blocks is not allowed, except perhaps in an enclosed garage. Check with your local jurisdiction before taking this step.

**5. Temporarily disable the vehicle.**

Ask a mechanic to show you how to disconnect the car's battery or otherwise temporarily disable it. That way, if a spouse or other household member needs to use the car, reconnecting it is relatively easy.

**6. Park the car elsewhere.**

Park the car down the street, around the corner, or out of sight in a neighbor's garage to make it inaccessible.

## Look for Alternatives

A person who has been driving for decades and who takes pride in his or her independence will likely resist attempts to restrict driving privileges. That independence is difficult to give up, especially in neighborhoods without good public transportation.

The person may not want to burden friends or family to get where he or she wants to go.

In modern American culture, driving is important. For many, it involves not just mobility, but status and self-esteem. For these reasons, those who have Alzheimer's are unlikely to admit driving difficulties. So, family members and physicians must balance the person's convenience with the safety of the driver, passengers, and other drivers on the road.

When restricting driving privileges becomes an issue, you can ease the transition by investigating alternative methods of getting from place to place. Here are some choices you can make available to your loved one in place of a personal motor vehicle.

### **1. Friends and family**

Are you willing to provide all or part of your loved one's transportation needs? What about other family members? If friends say, "Let me know if I can do anything to help," suggest they give your loved one a ride to the grocery store, hairdresser, or doctor's appointment. You can also ask for volunteers at your place of worship.

## **2. Public transportation**

Gather information about bus routes, train schedules, and taxi services. See whether they offer discounts for older individuals or those with disabilities. Calculate round-trip fares from your loved one's home to frequently visited locations such as the grocery store, doctor's office, barber shop, or library.

## **3. Government-funded transportation**

Investigate availability of government-funded transportation for people with disabilities. Inquire about how to qualify for such programs.

## **4. Delivery services**

To reduce the need for trips outside the home, look for pharmacies, office supply stores, restaurants, and other businesses that deliver goods and services to the home. Find a courier service that operates in your area, or see whether a taxi service will perform that function. Look into the Meals on Wheels program in your area.

## State Driver's Licensing Authorities

State driver's licensing authorities can give you information about how to request a review of driving privileges. Contact them if taking away the car keys from a person who has Alzheimer's disease becomes necessary.

### **Alabama**

Driver's License Division  
Department of Public Safety  
500 Dexter Ave.  
PO Box 1471  
Montgomery, AL 36102

### **Alaska**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
Department of Administration  
5700 E. Tudor Rd.  
Anchorage, AK 99507-1225

### **Arizona**

Motor Vehicles Division  
Department of Transportation  
1801 W. Jefferson  
Phoenix, AZ 85007

### **Arkansas**

Policy and Legal Revenue Division  
Department of Finance and  
Administration  
PO Box 1272  
Little Rock, AR 72203

### **California**

Headquarters Operation  
Department of Motor Vehicles  
PO Box 932328  
Sacramento, CA 94232-3280

### **Colorado**

Division of Motor Vehicles Hearings  
Department of Revenue  
Denver, CO 80261-0016

### **Connecticut**

Department of Motor Vehicles  
60 State St.  
Wethersfield, CT 06109

### **Delaware**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
Department of Public Safety  
PO Box 698  
Dover, DE 19903

### **Florida**

Motor Vehicles Division  
Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles  
Neil Kirkman Building  
2900 Apalachee Pkwy.  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0500

### **Georgia**

Motor Vehicle Division  
270 Washington St., SW, Room 104  
Atlanta, GA 30303

### **Hawaii**

Driver's License Section  
PO Box 30340  
Honolulu, HI 96820

**Idaho**

Motor Vehicle Bureau  
 Department of Transportation  
 PO Box 7129  
 Boise, ID 83707-1129

**Illinois**

Secretary of State  
 Medical Review  
 2701 S. Dirksen Pkwy.  
 Springfield, IL 62723

**Indiana**

Bureau of Motor Vehicles  
 100 N. Senate Ave.  
 Indianapolis, IN 46204

**Iowa**

Motor Vehicle Division  
 Department of Transportation  
 PO Box 10382  
 Des Moines, IA 50306

**Kansas**

Division of Vehicles  
 Department of Revenue  
 Docking State Office Building,  
 Room 162-S  
 915 S.W. Harrison St.  
 Topeka, KS 66626-0001

**Kentucky**

Transportation Cabinet  
 Department of Vehicle Regulation  
 State Office Building, Room 308  
 501 High St.  
 Frankfort, KY 40622-0001

**Louisiana**

Office of Motor Vehicles  
 Public Safety and Corrections  
 Department  
 PO Box 66614  
 Baton Rouge, LA 70896

**Maine**

Bureau of Motor Vehicles  
 Department of State  
 29 State House Station  
 Augusta, ME 04333

**Maryland**

Motor Vehicle Administration  
 Maryland Department of Transportation  
 6601 Ritchie Highway, NE, Room 120  
 Glen Burnie, MD 21062

**Massachusetts**

Registry of Motor Vehicles/Medical  
 Affairs  
 PO Box 199100  
 Boston, MA 02119

**Michigan**

Department of State  
 Driver Assessment Support Unit  
 7064 Crowner Dr.  
 Lansing, MI 48918

**Minnesota**

Auto License Office  
 Driver and Vehicle Services Division  
 Department of Public Safety  
 445 Minnesota St., Ste. 195  
 St. Paul, MN 55101-5195

**Mississippi**

Motor Vehicle Commission  
 1755 Lelia Dr., Ste. 200  
 P.O. Box 16873  
 Jackson, MS 39236

**Missouri**

Division of Motor Vehicles and Drivers  
 Licensing  
 PO Box 200  
 Jefferson City, MO 65105-0200

**Montana**

Department of Justice  
 Motor Vehicle Division  
 Attention: Medical Department  
 303 N. Roberts  
 PO Box 201630  
 Helena, MT 59620-1430

**Nebraska**

Department of Motor Vehicles  
 Driver Examining Division  
 PO Box 94726  
 Lincoln, NE 68509-4789

**Nevada**

Department of Motor Vehicles and  
 Public Safety  
 555 Wright Way  
 Carson City, NV 89711-0900

**New Hampshire**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
 Department of Safety  
 10 Hazen Dr.  
 Concord, NH 03305-0002

**New Jersey**

Division of Motor Vehicle Services  
 Department of Law and Public Safety  
 225 E. State St.  
 PO Box 160  
 Trenton, NJ 08625-0160

**New Mexico**

Motor Vehicle Division  
 Department of Taxation and Revenue  
 PO Box 1028  
 Santa Fe, NM 87504-1028

**New York**

Department of Motor Vehicles  
 Swan St. Building, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, Room 136  
 Empire State Plaza  
 Albany, NY 12228

**North Carolina**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
 Department of Transportation  
 1100 New Bern Ave.  
 Raleigh, NC 27697-0001

**North Dakota**

Driver License and Traffic Safety  
 Division  
 Department of Transportation  
 608 E. Blvd. Ave.  
 Bismarck, ND 58505-0700

**Oklahoma**

Motor Vehicle Division  
 Tax Commission  
 4334 NW Expressway, STE. 183  
 Oklahoma City, OK 73116

**Ohio**

Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles  
 Attn: MVOS DM  
 P.O. Box 16520  
 Columbus, OH 43266-0020

**Oregon**

Motor Vehicles Division  
 Department of Transportation  
 1905 Lana Ave., NE  
 Salem, OR 97314

**Pennsylvania**

Bureau of Motor Vehicles  
 Department of Transportation  
 1101 S. Front St., 4<sup>th</sup> Floor  
 Harrisburg, PA 17104

**Rhode Island**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
 286 Main St.  
 Pawtucket, RI 02860

**South Carolina**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
P.O. Box 1498  
Columbia, SC 29216

**South Dakota**

Division of Drivers Licensing  
Dept. of Commerce & Regulation  
Public Safety Building  
118 W. Capitol Ave.  
Pierre, SD 57501

**Tennessee**

Department of Safety  
Driver Improvement Section  
1150 Foster Ave.  
Nashville, TN 37249

**Texas**

Motor Vehicle Division  
Department of Transportation  
200 E. Riverside Dr., Bldg. 150  
Austin, TX 78704

**Utah**

Department of Public Safety  
Driver's License Division  
PO Box 30560  
Salt Lake City, UT 84130-0560

**Vermont**

Agency of Transportation  
Department of Motor Vehicles  
120 State St.  
Montpelier, VT 05602

**Virginia**

Department of Motor Vehicles  
2300 W. Broad St.  
Richmond, VA 23220

**Washington**

Vehicle Services  
Department of Licensing  
PO Box 48020  
Olympia, WA 98507-8020

**West Virginia**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
Department of Transportation  
Bldg. 3, Room 337  
1900 Kanawha Blvd., E.  
Charleston, WV 25305

**Wisconsin**

Division of Motor Vehicles  
Department of Transportation  
4802 Sheboygan Ave., Room 221  
PO Box 7949  
Madison, WI 53707

**Wyoming**

Department of Transportation  
Driver License Control  
5300 Bishop Blvd.  
Box 1708  
Cheyenne, WY 82002