



*Safe Driving
And Alzheimer's Disease*
A Special Report

Anthony B. Ferraro, Partner,
Robbins DiMonte – Attorneys at Law
216 Higgins Road
Park Ridge, IL, 60068
Phone: (847) 221-0154
AFerraro@robbinsdimonte.com

The
Alzheimer's
Law Firm

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www.AlzheimersHope.com

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, 5th 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., 4th 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