

having the conversation

talking to your senior about driving safety

by Debbie Bernacki, RN

Older adults are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population. In the next 20 years, the number of people 65 or older is expected to reach 70 million. This could represent a big problem on the roads, as older drivers may outlive their driving ability by 7-10 years.

But seniors will need to keep driving. Many live in rural areas with little or no public transportation. And while there may be volunteer ride organizations, they typically offer limited services. Even if family is close by, seniors may only be able to get rides for basic needs like doctor visits and food shopping.

As a result, many older adults who stop driving will suffer from isolation that affects physical and mental health. Similarly, when older adults stop driving, the loss of independence may worsen their health status and confidence in their ability to care for themselves. For these and many other reasons it will be important to many seniors to drive as long as they can. But if you are responsible for a senior who drives, you may be unsure if they really should be. Ask yourself these questions:

- Does the individual get lost on routes that are familiar?
- Are there new dents or scratches to the vehicle?
- Has he/she received a ticket for a driving violation?
- Are they suffering illness or taking medication that may affect safety?
- Are they overwhelmed by road signs and markings while driving?
- Have they been advised to limit/stop driving due to a health reason?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, consider having "the conversation." Here you will have the opportunity to share concrete examples of driving problems in a caring, respectful, and non-confrontational conversation. It is important to show genuine concern and to offer alternatives that respect the driver's sense of independence.

Here are other "conversation" tips that may be helpful:

- Keep the discussion between "adults," not "child and parent."
- Make the goal to preserve independence (but not necessarily by driving)
- Use words such as "safe conditions," not "restrictions."
- Open up options such as outside assessment by a doctor or occupational therapist, or suggest a driver refresher course.



When the inevitable occurs and the driver agrees to hang up the keys, there are a couple of important housekeeping matters. Turn in

license plates and get a receipt for them. And notify the insurance company the senior no longer is driving.

For seniors, this "rite of passage" is likely to be difficult. If there is a confrontation, you may want to get some help. If you can, find someone the individual respects and/or trusts. Consider friends, clergy, or a physician. If a doctor, ask them to write a prescription saying they can't drive anymore. If necessary, use this as a reminder and show them the prescription.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Debbie Bernacki, RN, is president of the homecare agency Happier at Home. She lives in Pittsford with her 4 children.

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