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Dementia and Driving

If you are caring for someone with dementia, you should know that all people with dementia will eventually reach a point where they will have to stop driving because of their illness. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), changes in someone's physical, emotional, and mental condition can have a profound effect on his/her driving abilities.

When Should Someone With Dementia Stop Driving? Even though the person may be upset about this loss of independence, safety and avoidance of liability must be the priority. If you would not want your children or grandchildren in the vehicle, on the street, or in another vehicle when the person with dementia is driving, it is past time for the driving to stop.

Caregivers should look for specific clues in the behavior of a person with dementia that may signal it's time to take the keys. The NHTSA identifies the following warning signs:

- Needing more help with directions
- Forgetting where the car is parked
- Having trouble making turns, especially left turns
- Being confused by traffic signals
- Receiving citations for moving violations
- Putting dents or scrapes on the car that can't be explained
- Getting lost
- Getting angry
- Appearing confused

- Forgetting how to locate familiar places
- Failing to observe traffic signs
- Making slow or poor decisions in traffic
- Driving at an inappropriate speed
- Using poor lane control
- Making errors at intersections
- Confusing the brake and gas pedals
- Returning from a routine drive later than usual
- Forgetting the destination during the trip
- Difficulty turning to see when backing up
- Hitting curbs
- Other drivers often honk horns
- Confusion at exits
- Stopping in traffic for no apparent reason or stopping at green lights
- Delayed response to unexpected situations
- Scrapes or dents on the mailbox or garage
- Forgetting to buckle up

The decision to stop a person with dementia from driving should be made sooner rather than later. This will protect not only that person, but others riding with him or her as well as other motorists and pedestrians.

People with dementia cannot catalog new information, so they cannot react appropriately. If you see a ball roll into the street, you stop because you know a child is coming after it. People with dementia may not stop until they see the child, or they may not be able to sort out whether to hit the brake or the gas.

What to Do Once the Decision Is Made. The following tips can help you manage the process of breaking the “no more driving” news to your loved one:

- **Be sensitive but be firm.** You'll want to be sensitive to your loved one's feelings about losing the ability to drive, but be firm in requesting that he or she no longer drive. You should be consistent, which means you should not allow the person to drive at all, even on good days.

- **Ask for help.** The person with dementia may respond better to an authority figure. His or her doctor can request an evaluation by the Department of Motor Vehicles or the Riverside Center for Excellence in Aging. Additionally, anyone can contact the Department of Motor Vehicles to report concerns. Upon receiving such a report, the licensing bureau will notify the person that his or her license will be suspended unless he or she appears to take a driving test.

- **Accept responsibility.** Once the decision has been made, do what you have to do.

- Take the keys, or
- Substitute a different set of keys, or
- Disable the car, or
- Move the car to another location, and whenever the person wants to drive, tell him the car is in the shop for repairs, or
- File down the person's key so it cannot start the car, but your key can, or
- Have a locksmith make a key that looks like the key but doesn't work, or
- "Loan" the car to a child or grandchild who needs it, or
- Throw a "giving up driving party" with family members giving certificates for free rides to the store, to the bank, and so on, or
- Ask the physician to write a letter stating that the person must not drive, or
- Ask the physician to write a prescription that says, "No driving."

- **Create a plan for alternate transportation.** Losing the ability to drive is likely to make people with dementia feel as though they are no longer able to be independent. It is important to reassure them that, with the help of family, friends, and other modes of transportation, they will still be able to get around town and do the things they want to do. It is essential to follow up with alternate plans.

- You can hire a regular driver to handle doctors' appointments and to have set shopping times.
- List the names and phone numbers of friends and relatives who are willing to give rides, with the days and times they are available.
- List the phone number of a local cab company.

- List the names and phone numbers of volunteer drivers from the community centers, churches, or synagogues.
- Get groceries delivered

With a little bit of advance planning, and a whole lot of compassion and understanding, you can make the transition easier. But even if it's difficult, it has to be done for the safety of both your loved one and everyone else.