

Driving and Memory Loss

Driving an automobile safely, particularly in a crowded urban area, is a complex challenge to mental processes and judgment. Dementia raises risk of accidents as much as five-fold. One study found that 3 out of 4 older persons with dementia who continued to drive were involved in an accident.

Older drivers, particularly those with memory disorders, are generally cautious and careful. However, as any driver knows, a sudden event (a child running in front of the car, an object in the road forcing a quick lane change) can turn a routine trip into a disaster if the exactly correct response is not made to a challenging situation.

Other concerns for persons with dementia and their families are the legal consequences should an accident occur. A person with a known memory problem is likely to be blamed for any accident, no matter who is at fault. Financial losses could be extremely high, and insurers may not cover what they view as negligence in allowing the person to drive.

The loss of driving privileges is serious. It may threaten the independence not only of the driver but also of a couple or household, if the affected person is the primary or only driver. The person with the memory problem cannot understand others' concern because one of the first things lost to the disease is the ability to see their own impairment. The spouse also may be overwhelmed by the life style changes that the loss of driving would produce and argue for the person's continued driving despite concerns about safety.

- The safest strategy is to stop driving. Let others drive.
- If this is unacceptable and the memory problem is mild, begin to plan for the time when driving is no longer possible.
- Stop all driving in unfamiliar, crowded, or congested areas during busy times of the day

If the person with a more severe memory problem is unwilling to stop driving, find out if you reside in a state that allows anyone to report the problem to the Department of Motor Vehicles. The report makes a driving test mandatory, and the person's license will be revoked if he or she fails the test. The identity of the person making the report is confidential.