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January 25, 2005

Staying safe, independent

The last time we explored the issue of older drivers and the alarming statistics related to older drivers involved in traffic accidents. The effect older drivers have on our lives will only become more pronounced with time. The population is aging, but people are living longer, and remain healthier longer, than ever before. Driving is key to an active lifestyle, in direct correlation with one's concept of independence and freedom. Therefore, people want to keep driving as long as possible. In 1995, there were 16.5 million licensed drivers over the age of 70, which represented a 47 percent increase from 1985. By 2020, 54 million Americans will be over 65 years of age...and still driving.

How then do we help our aging relatives stay independent but safe? How do we know when we should turn over the keys and look for alternate methods of transportation? There is no magic age that determines when we should stop driving or when we should convince our relatives to stop driving. It may just be a matter of changing driving habits and incorporating safe driving skills that take into account the changes in the body that occur with aging. Everyone ages differently and some individuals develop disease processes that make the decision to stop driving clear cut. If you suspect you or a loved one is developing increased difficulty with safe driving, some questions to ask are:

- Do other drivers often honk at me? Do people or cars seem to appear from nowhere?
- Do I often have fender benders or near misses?
- Do I often get lost, even on roads I know? Are road signs hard to see?
- Do my thoughts wander or do I find it hard to concentrate?
- Have my family, friends, my doctor, or the police spoken to me about my driving?

Many persons agree to retire from driving if the facts are presented carefully and lovingly, and careful planning has gone into preparing for the transition to an active non-driving lifestyle. Consider carefully the possibility of the inability to drive when looking for a retirement home. Help the senior investigate transportation options. Area Agencies on Aging often have transportation options for seniors at little to no cost. Taxi service at senior citizen rates is often available. AAA now estimates the cost of owning and running a car at \$6,420 a year. By giving up your car, you could have as much as \$123 per week to spend on taxis or other public transportation. Develop a network of friends and family to drive you. You can do things for them and in turn, they can help you.

It is very important to remember that listening and supporting an older relative will go a long way to helping them make the decision to stop driving on their own. Don't scold or harangue a loved one to give up the keys. Adults rarely respond positively to such tactics, especially if it is coming from their children! The mere thought of giving up the keys can provoke feelings of dependence, abandonment, and even the feeling of imprisonment in an older driver. Be supportive and available, making regular appointments to take out the relative, in order to aid the loved one in combating the fear of loneliness. Develop a plan with the older driver that may include a gradual reduction in driving time and distance until he or she is ready to finally retire from driving.

Sometimes, the older driver refuses to consider the fact that he or she should no longer be on the road. Try getting help, especially from your relative's friends. Studies have shown that older drivers do not find their children's assessment of their driving credible. Fellow seniors may be more likely to have an effect. Enlist the help of your relative's personal physician. At the very least, the physician can professionally explain the effect aging has had on that particular individual, and make recommendations. Finally, report unsafe drivers to the Department of Motor Vehicles (717-787-9662). This is a drastic step and you should learn the consequences and be prepared to live with them. However, sometimes safety demands leave no other choice. Giving up the keys, like aging, should be a gradual process and it can be accomplished without a crisis, so long as proper planning is provided.