

# Driving Decisions WORKBOOK



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David W. Eby  
Lisa J. Molnar  
Jean T. Shope

**Social and Behavioral Analysis Division  
University of Michigan  
Transportation Research Institute**

# **Driving Decisions W O R K B O O K**

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**David W. Eby  
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Jean T. Shope**

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## Driving Decisions Workbook

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All of us need to be able to get around. Getting around is important not only for running errands, going to appointments, and getting to work, but in order to visit with friends and family, to have fun, and to just get out of the house. Most of us prefer to get around by driving a car. Some of us, however, may have changes in our abilities, such as seeing, that make it more difficult to drive safely. Some changes occur with age and happen so slowly over time that we may not even have noticed them. In order to make good decisions about driving, it is important to know as much as possible about any changes in ability we've had, how these changes might be related to safe driving, and what we can do about them.

This workbook will help you learn about age-related changes in abilities and habits that could affect safe driving. After you respond to questions about yourself, feedback is provided about what various changes may mean for driving and what you can do to increase safety.

The workbook contains five sections—each has to do with an area that affects safe driving. Each section should take 5-10 minutes to read and complete. Within each section, there are questions on different topics. For each question, please circle the answer that best describes your situation. Arrows connect certain answers to feedback—information about various problems and suggestions to deal with those problems.

Regardless of your answers, you may want to read all of the feedback to learn more about what various changes could mean for your driving in the future. Or, you may be thinking of other people who may have had these changes. Knowing more about age-related changes that can affect driving helps us to anticipate situations and plan ahead for them.

You can go through the workbook by yourself, with a friend, or with your family. Everyone can benefit from knowing more about how to keep driving safely.

The five sections in this workbook include:



### On the Road



### Seeing



### Thinking



### Getting Around



### Health



## ON THE ROAD

### Questions:

How stressful for you is driving in unfamiliar areas during the daytime?

*Not at all*

*Not very*

*Somewhat*

*Very*

How much difficulty do you have following directions or a map in unfamiliar areas?

*None*

*A little*

*Some*

*A lot*

Do you avoid driving to new places far away from home?

*No*

*Yes*

### Feedback:

Driving in unfamiliar areas may be a problem for you. Certain types of driving errors are more likely on unfamiliar than familiar routes, including stopping over the limit lines, driving too slowly, and turning too wide or too short.

- ▶ Plan your trip ahead of time and write down driving instructions.
- ▶ Do a trial run with a passenger before your actual trip.
- ▶ Choose left-turn locations where traffic signals have arrows.
- ▶ Ask someone to ride with you to read a map or street signs.
- ▶ Be prepared for an emergency by thinking of potential problems. Take along emergency signs and phone numbers.
- ▶ Reduce distractions in your car (for example, don't smoke, eat, talk on phone, put on makeup, shave, watch scenery, or daydream).



**Questions:**

How stressful for you is driving at night?

*Not at all*    *Not very*    *Somewhat*    *Very*

During night driving, do you think that most other drivers on the road are driving too fast?

*No*    *Yes*

During night driving, how much difficulty do you have reading well-lit signs?

*None*    *A little*    *Some*    *A lot*

During night driving, how much difficulty do you have seeing because of oncoming headlights, even when they are properly dimmed?

*None*    *A little*    *Some*    *A lot*

During night driving in the past year, how many traffic tickets or warnings have you had?

*None*    *One*    *Two or more*

During night driving in the past year, how many times have you almost or actually been in a traffic accident?

*None*    *One*    *Two or more*

In the past year, has a friend, relative, or doctor expressed concern about your driving at night?

*No*    *Yes*

**Feedback:**

Night driving may be a problem for you. This could be from a decline in vision over time. More information on vision loss is given in the section on "seeing."

- ▶ Before starting out, give your eyes at least 5 minutes to adjust to the darkness.
- ▶ Avoid wearing tinted glasses or sunglasses.
- ▶ Make sure that your car's windshield, windows, mirrors, and headlights are clean.
- ▶ Always dim your headlights for oncoming cars.
- ▶ Try to drive on well-lit streets—the more light there is, the easier it is to read signs, and the less headlight glare there is.
- ▶ Consider getting an eye exam.
- ▶ If you must go out at night, make sure to drive more cautiously.
- ▶ Reduce the amount of night driving you do, or stop altogether.



**Questions:**

How stressful for you is driving in bad weather (such as rain, snow, or fog)?

*Not at all*      *Not very*      *Somewhat*      *Very*

How much does rain on the windshield bother you?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

While driving in bad weather in the past year, how many times have you almost or actually been in a traffic accident?

*None*      *One*      *Two or more*

In the past year, has a friend, relative, or doctor expressed concern about your driving in bad weather?

*No*      *Yes*

**Feedback:**

Driving in bad weather may be a problem for you. Bad weather can affect your ability to see well and drive safely.

- ▲ Choose your driving conditions wisely. Avoid driving in bad weather by checking weather conditions before you start out.
- ▲ Make sure you are well stocked with food and other household necessities so that you don't have to go out in bad weather.
- ▲ If you must drive in bad weather, turn on your lights regardless of the time of day.
- ▲ Make sure that your car's windshield, windows, mirrors, and headlights are clean.
- ▲ Check your brakes before starting out to make sure they're working.
- ▲ Increase your "cushion of safety" by allowing more distance between you and the car in front of you. While stopped in traffic, you should be able to see the tires of the car in front of you.
- ▲ Be alert to changing road conditions.
- ▲ If weather becomes bad, park well off the road and wait—if you are on the freeway, get off at an exit before finding a safe place to park.
- ▲ Slow down in anticipation of slippery spots.

**Questions:**

How stressful for you is driving in heavy traffic?

*Not at all*   *Not very*   *Somewhat*   *Very*

How much difficulty do you have pulling out into a busy street or freeway?

*None*   *A little*   *Some*   *A lot*

How often do other cars proceed when you feel you have the right of way at intersections with stop signs?

*Never*   *Rarely*   *Sometimes*   *Often*

How often do other drivers honk at you?

*Never*   *Rarely*   *Sometimes*   *Often*

While driving in heavy traffic in the past year, how many traffic tickets or warnings have you had?

*None*   *One*   *Two or more*

While driving in heavy traffic in the past year, how many times have you almost or actually been in a traffic accident?

*None*   *One*   *Two or more*

In the past year, has a friend, relative, or doctor expressed concern about your driving in heavy traffic?

*No*   *Yes*

**Feedback:**

Driving in heavy traffic may be a problem for you. This may be due to changes in your vision, your thinking, or your movement abilities. These changes are discussed in sections on "seeing," "thinking," and "getting around." Together, these changes may reduce your ability to react quickly and safely to the demands of driving in heavy traffic.

Studies show that intersections that cause trouble for older drivers are those with right-of-way and left-turn decisions. Drivers may have trouble using information from several sources at once, anticipating what others may do, paying attention to traffic signs and signals, and being aware of their own position in traffic.

- ▲ Avoid driving in congested, fast-moving traffic.
- ▲ Find out before you leave home about road closings and construction (through radio, newspapers, TV).
- ▲ Plan your routes in advance to reduce the number of left turns you must make.
- ▲ Increase your cushion of safety by allowing more distance between your car and the car in front of you.
- ▲ Stay current on rules of the road and become familiar with new lane markings and traffic signals and signs.
- ▲ Let other drivers and pedestrians know your intentions by positioning your car in the proper lane and signaling.
- ▲ Check all your mirrors often—we tend to focus on what's ahead, but traffic comes from many directions.
- ▲ Consider taking a driving refresher course. You may want to contact your AARP or AAA office or Area Agency on Aging to find out more about such courses.

**Questions:**

In the past year, have you dozed or "nodded off" for a moment while driving?

No

Yes

In the past year, have you had to open the window, play the radio, or have a passenger talk with you in order to stay alert while driving?

No

Yes

How stressful for you is driving long distances?

Not at all

Not very

Somewhat

Very

**Feedback:**

You may get overly tired while driving. Older drivers are especially prone to "highway hypnosis" with increased blinking, dozing off, lapses in time not remembered, voices and sounds that seem far away or louder than normal, and your car slowing down without your awareness that you let up on the gas.

- ▶ Start out well rested—don't drive if you are tired or sleepy.
- ▶ Pace yourself—take a break every 1-2 hours on long trips.
- ▶ Get out of the car and stretch or walk on breaks.
- ▶ Drink plenty of water.
- ▶ Increase your strength and flexibility by exercise to help prevent tiredness.
- ▶ Ask someone else to drive when tired.
- ▶ Remember that most methods people use to stay awake while driving only work for a short period of time, and sometimes not at all.

**Questions:**

Overall, how stressful for you is driving?

*Not at all*      *Not very*      *Somewhat*      *Very*



How much difficulty do you have backing up?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*



How much difficulty do you have making right turns?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*



How much difficulty do you have making left turns across traffic?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*



How often do you find yourself disoriented while driving?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*



**Feedback:**

You could be having a general problem with your driving. Here are some things you can do:

- ▶ Plan your route before you start, so you can focus your effort on driving, rather than finding your way.
- ▶ Adjust mirrors and seat before starting.
- ▶ Always check your mirrors and blind spots, and signal well before making a lane change.
- ▶ Stay informed of changes in highway regulations, traffic signals, and symbols.
- ▶ Consider taking a driving refresher course. Contact your AARP or AAA office or Area Agency on Aging to find out more about such courses.
- ▶ Consider having a medical, vision, or driving check-up.
- ▶ When driving an unfamiliar car, take time to locate all controls before you start out.
- ▶ Travel when there is little traffic, such as during the middle of the day.
- ▶ Avoid left turns, if possible. This can be done by planning your travel routes in advance.
- ▶ Reduce distractions while driving, such as listening to the radio, talking with a passenger, or sightseeing.
- ▶ Gather information on local alternatives to driving such as public transportation, taxi services, or senior ride programs, and try them out.



**Questions:**

In the past year, have you noticed that someone preferred to ride with someone else or drive, rather than ride with you driving?

No

Yes

In the past year, has a friend or family member refused to ride with you because of your driving?

No

Yes

In the past year, has a friend, relative, or doctor expressed concern about your driving?

No

Yes

**Feedback:**

Relatives, friends, and doctors can be a valuable and objective source of information about your driving. Research shows that many older drivers expect their family and friends to discuss driving problems with them, but such conversations can be difficult. Family and friends may try to share their concerns about driving but some older drivers may resist hearing those concerns.

- ▶ Ask a trusted person to honestly tell you how safely they think you drive.
- ▶ If others express concern, you might consider reducing or stopping your driving.
- ▶ Consider taking a driving refresher course. Contact your AARP or AAA office or Area Agency on Aging to find out more about such courses.
- ▶ Consider having an evaluation of your driving done. Ask your local driving schools, doctor, or Area Agency on Aging to find out where you might get an evaluation done.

**Questions:**

How many times have you almost or actually been in a traffic accident in the past year?

*None*

*One*

*Two or more*

How many traffic tickets or warnings have you had in the past year?

*None*

*One*

*Two or more*

**Feedback:**

Drivers who have almost or actually been in traffic accidents are more likely to have an accident in the future, regardless of whether or not they were at fault. If you have come close to being in an accident, think about how you might have prevented the situation. Could you have reacted differently? Did you fail to see something? Why was the other car honking at you?

Tickets can also be an early warning sign of driving problems. Some drivers are aware of their limits and cope with them. Others, however, overestimate their abilities. The most frequent problems of older drivers include failure to observe signs and signals, careless crossing of intersections, failure to yield, changing lanes without regard for others, improper backing, and driving too slowly. Inattention and having too much information to handle at once seem to be the root of most of these conditions.

- ▶ Consider taking a driving refresher course. Contact your AARP or AAA office or Area Agency on Aging to find out more about such courses.
- ▶ Consider having a private evaluation of your driving done. Ask your local driving schools, doctor, or Area Agency on Aging to find out where you might get an evaluation done.



## SEEING

In answering these questions, assume that you are wearing glasses or contact lenses if you normally do.

### Questions:

Would you say your eyesight now using both eyes (with glasses or contact lenses, if you wear them) is:

*Excellent*      *Good*      *Fair*      *Poor*

How much do you worry about how well you see now?

*Not at all*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

Has a doctor ever told you that you are blind in one eye?

*No*      *Yes*

### Feedback:

You may have a vision problem. As we age, we experience declines in our vision. There are several types of vision declines that could increase the chance of being in an accident. These declines relate to our ability to read traffic signs, recover our focus at night, quickly detect brake lights, and correctly judge the speed and location of other cars around us. While some vision problems are not correctable, many problems can be corrected under a doctor's care.

- ▶ It is important to get regular eye exams.
- ▶ Let the eye doctor know about any changes in your vision.



**Questions:**

How much difficulty do you have seeing due to the glare from your windshield when the sun is low in the sky?

None      A little      Some      A lot

When driving at night, how much are you bothered by the properly dimmed headlights of oncoming cars?

Not at all      A little      Some      A lot

How much difficulty do you have seeing something when lights are being reflected from it (for example, watching television when the room lights are shining on the screen)?

None      A little      Some      A lot

**Feedback:**

You may have difficulty with "glare recovery." As we age, our eyes become more sensitive to glare, making it more difficult to see while driving at night. Studies show that older people need a lot more time than younger people to see properly after lights are shined into their eyes. Some drivers try to solve this problem by wearing sunglasses at night, but that actually makes it more difficult to see at night and makes for a more dangerous driver.

- ▲ It is important to have regular eye exams.
- ▲ Let the eye doctor know about any problems you may be having with glare recovery.
- ▲ Try to avoid driving at night.
- ▲ Avoid looking directly into the headlights of other cars on the road.
- ▲ Try to drive on well-lit streets—the more light there is, the less headlight glare there is.



**Questions:**

How much difficulty do you have reading ordinary newspaper print?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty do you have reading small print in a telephone book, on a medicine bottle, or on a map?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

When driving at night, does your instrument panel seem blurry or out-of-focus even though it is bright enough?

*No*      *Yes*

**Feedback:**

You may be having a problem with near-vision; that is, the ability to see things clearly that are close. As we age, our ability to see details, such as printed words or the car's instrument panel, may decline. Problems with near-vision can also be caused by cataracts which often can be treated successfully.

Because glasses or contact lenses may help you see better, it is important to:

- ▶ Get regular eye exams.
- ▶ Tell the eye doctor about any changes in your near-vision.

**Questions:**

When you are not moving, how much difficulty do you have reading a sign or recognizing a picture because it is moving (such as an advertisement on a passing bus or truck)?

None    *A little*    *Some*    *A lot*



How much difficulty do you have, because of your eyesight, recognizing people across a room?

None    *A little*    *Some*    *A lot*



Do you need to squint in order to see things far away or to watch television?

*No*                      *Yes*



**Feedback:**

You may be having a problem with far-vision; that is, the ability to see things clearly that are far away. In driving, problems with far-vision may make it difficult to read road signs and see lines painted on the road. Studies show that problems with far-vision increase with age and can increase our chance of being in an accident. Problems with far-vision can also be made worse by cataracts which can often be treated successfully.

Because glasses or contact lenses may help you see better, it is important to:

- ▲ Get regular eye exams.
- ▲ Tell your eye doctor of any changes in your far-vision.



**Questions:**

How often when you are driving and looking straight ahead, do other vehicles seem to come into your peripheral or side vision unexpectedly?

Never Rarely Sometimes Often



When merging into traffic, how often are you "surprised" by a vehicle that you didn't notice until it was quite close to you?

Never Rarely Sometimes Often



While looking ahead, whether driving or not, how much difficulty do you have noticing things off to the side?

None A little Some A lot



**Feedback:**

You may have reduced peripheral or side vision, the ability to see off to the sides without moving our head or eyes. The larger our side vision, the more we can see without moving our head or eyes. Research shows that as we age, our side vision decreases. Studies also show that decreased side vision can increase a person's chance of being in an accident. Decreased side vision makes it harder to see cars and people off to the side, making it difficult to react in time to avoid a problem.

Things you can do that may help you partly overcome a problem with reduced side vision include:

- ▶ Move your head and eyes to the sides occasionally as you drive.
- ▶ Adjust the existing mirrors on your car to increase your range of vision.
- ▶ Use special mirrors that increase your range of vision.

**Questions:**

How much difficulty do you have indoors seeing when the lights are dim (for example, reading a menu in a dimly lit restaurant)?



How much difficulty do you have at night keeping your car's instrument panel in focus because it is just too dim?



How much difficulty do you have seeing the taillights of other vehicles because they are not bright enough?



**Feedback:**

You may have decreased sensitivity to light. Sensitivity to light has to do with our ability to see things when the light is dim, such as at night. Studies show that sensitivity decreases with age—the older we are the more light we need to see things and the longer it takes for our eyes to adjust to changes in lighting conditions. Decreased sensitivity might make it more difficult to drive at night and, therefore, less safe.

- ▶ It is important to notice changes in your sensitivity to light.
- ▶ Get regular eye exams.
- ▶ Try to avoid driving at night.
- ▶ Increase the brightness of your car's instrument panel if it can be adjusted.
- ▶ If you must drive at night, drive more cautiously.
- ▶ Try to drive on well-lit streets—the more light there is, the better you will be able to see.
- ▶ Make sure your windshield, lights, and mirrors are clean.

**Questions:**

How much difficulty do you have judging your speed without looking at the speedometer?

None      A little      Some      A lot



How much difficulty do you have judging distances for parking?

None      A little      Some      A lot



How much difficulty do you have judging how fast you are approaching a stopped vehicle?

None      A little      Some      A lot



**Feedback:**

You may be having a problem with depth perception—our ability to accurately judge the distance between other objects and us. In driving, we use depth perception to merge with and to cross traffic, as well as for parking. Studies show that these abilities may decline with age—older drivers perceive distance less accurately than younger drivers do.

- ▶ It is important to be aware of changes in your vision.
- ▶ Have your eyes checked by your eye doctor regularly.
- ▶ Allow more distance between your car and the car in front of you.
- ▶ Pay attention to cars braking far ahead of you—not just the car immediately in front of you—so you are more ready to stop.





# THINKING

## Questions:

In general, how much difficulty do you have carrying on a conversation and listening to the radio or television at the same time?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

While you are driving, how much difficulty do you have also talking with passengers?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

While you are driving, how much difficulty do you have also changing the radio station?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

## Feedback:

You may be having a problem with “divided attention”—the ability to do two things at once, such as keeping track of your driving speed and what other cars are doing at the same time. Research shows that tasks requiring divided attention, such as driving, become harder as we age. In normal driving, we must divide our attention among several things. The task becomes more difficult when there are distractions, either in the car (a radio or passenger) or outside (bad weather).

- ▶ Keep your eyes on the road while you are driving.
- ▶ Reduce distractions inside your car, such as talking with passengers, trying to read a road map, changing radio stations, or talking on the phone.
- ▶ Drive when there are fewer distractions outside (such as bad weather or heavy traffic).
- ▶ Plan your trip in advance.
- ▶ Have a passenger help you find your way.
- ▶ Avoid driving in unfamiliar areas.
- ▶ Avoid busy traffic situations.



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**Questions:**

How much difficulty do you have finding something on a crowded shelf?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty do you have carrying on a conversation when there is noise in the background (such as other people talking)?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty do you have finding a certain sign among many other signs (for example, finding a restaurant sign on a street with many other signs)?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

**Feedback:**

You may be having a problem with “selective attention”—the ability to ignore what is **not** important while focusing on what **is** important. In driving, this means our ability to quickly direct attention to the most important events. Studies show that selective attention abilities are poorer among older than younger adults, and that as selective attention abilities decline, the chance of being in an accident increases. Many problems for older drivers involve not seeing or correctly understanding road signs, as well as failing to yield the right-of-way. These problems come from not paying attention to the right things in the driving situation.

- ▶ Avoid driving where there are many signs.
- ▶ Plan your trip in advance.
- ▶ Have a passenger help you find your way.
- ▶ Avoid driving in unfamiliar areas.
- ▶ Avoid busy traffic situations.



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**Questions:**

How much difficulty do you have understanding people who speak quickly?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How often do you have to slow down to read unfamiliar road signs?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*

How often are you uncomfortable because traffic seems to be moving too quickly?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*

**Feedback:**

The speed of your thinking and decision making may have decreased. Research shows that this speed declines with age. This change can lead to slow or hesitant driving, unexpected lane changes, and slowed reactions to driving situations. All of these things combine to increase the chance of being in a traffic accident.

- ▶ Plan your trip in advance.
- ▶ Avoid busy traffic situations.
- ▶ Take routes that are less crowded.
- ▶ Avoid areas where drivers tend to drive very fast.
- ▶ Consider asking your doctor about checking your “*cognition*” (that is, your thinking).



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**Questions:**

In the past year, how often have you missed an appointment because you forgot about it?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*

In the past year, how often have you had difficulty finding your car in a parking lot?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*

In the past year, how often have you had difficulty finding your way home from a familiar place (such as the grocery store)?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*

**Feedback:**

You may be having a problem with your memory. Memory helps us use a familiar traffic route and remember the rules for safe driving behavior. Our memory is also important in problem solving and decision making. Studies show that some older adults have difficulty recalling things when they want to remember them. Even otherwise healthy older drivers may have trouble remembering what to do in certain driving situations or recalling driving rules or laws. This problem increases the chance of being in a traffic accident and should be taken seriously.

- ▶ You may want to ask your doctor about checking your memory.
- ▶ Consider taking a driving refresher course. Contact your AARP or AAA office or Area Agency on Aging to find out more about such courses.
- ▶ Plan your trip ahead and write down the route.
- ▶ Drive the route ahead of time to become familiar with it.
- ▶ Look up information that you are having trouble remembering. This will help you remember it in the future.





## GETTING AROUND

### Questions:

How much pain, stiffness, or weakness do you have in your hips, knees, ankles, or feet?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty do you have getting in and out of a car?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty do you have turning your head to back up or to check for traffic?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

### Feedback:

You may have decreased flexibility—how far we can move a joint or stretch a muscle. As we age, our flexibility can be reduced, making it harder to do certain driving tasks. Decreased neck flexibility makes it hard to turn our heads leading to difficulty backing up, checking for traffic at intersections, and changing lanes. Discomfort in joints can slow reaction time and reduce our ability to turn the steering wheel or step on the brake. Fortunately, studies show that flexibility can often be improved through exercise and stretching.

- ▶ Check with your doctor or senior center about programs in your area that might help you improve your flexibility.
- ▶ Avoid long periods of driving without a stretch break.
- ▶ Avoid driving when muscle or joint pain is intense.
- ▶ Avoid driving when muscles are stiff.
- ▶ Fit your car with special mirrors.
- ▶ Begin a fitness program. It's never too late to start.



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**Questions:**

How much difficulty do you have opening and closing doors in public buildings?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty do you have holding the steering wheel firmly?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty do you have pressing the brake pedal?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

**Feedback:**

You may have decreased muscle strength. Lack of strength in our arms or legs may interfere with our ability to accelerate, brake, or steer while driving. Studies suggest that we can improve our strength through exercise.

- ▶ Check with your doctor or senior center to find out about programs in your area that might help you to improve your strength.
- ▶ Check into fitting your car with devices that help people drive who have reduced strength.
- ▶ If your car does not have power steering or brakes, consider buying a car with those features.
- ▶ Begin a fitness program. It's never too late to start.



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**Questions:**

Can you quickly put your foot on the brake pedal?

*Yes*

*No*

Do you feel that your reactions are quick enough to handle a dangerous driving situation?

*Yes*

*No*

Could you swerve suddenly if necessary to avoid an unexpected hazard?

*Yes*

*No*

**Feedback:**

Your ability to quickly react to things may be reduced. In order to react quickly to something we must 1) see what the problem is, 2) decide what to do, and 3) do something. Slowed reaction times can occur because one or more of these three steps has slowed down. Research shows that as we age, our reaction time slows, particularly in situations that require us to respond to more than one thing at once.

- ▶ Because slowed reaction time may result from certain age-related medical conditions, it is important to get regular physical exams.
- ▶ Ask your doctor to check your reaction time.
- ▶ Try to avoid heavy traffic situations.
- ▶ Plan your trip in advance.





# HEALTH

## Questions:

How much difficulty would you have walking a half mile without help if you had to?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

How much difficulty would you have climbing two flights of stairs without help if you had to?

*None*      *A little*      *Some*      *A lot*

In general, would you say that your physical fitness is:

*Excellent*      *Good*      *Fair*      *Poor*

## Feedback:

Your overall physical fitness affects your ability to function on a day-to-day basis. Problems with daily physical functioning may precede problems in other areas, such as driving. Overall functioning is also important because older drivers may have several minor physical or medical problems, each of which taken separately may not affect their driving ability very much, but when taken together, could make driving dangerous.

- ▶ You have far more control over your personal fitness and health than you might think. Begin a fitness program. It is never too late to start.
- ▶ What you eat, how much you exercise, regular visits to the doctor, and following your doctor's advice can help you stay healthy and keep driving safely.



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**Question:**

Has a doctor ever told you that you have diabetes or high blood sugar?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Diabetes can interfere with your ability to drive safely. In diabetes, blood sugar can be high, which is treated by insulin and other medications, as well as diet and exercise. People treated for diabetes are at risk for low blood sugar, which can result from a change in their medication, unexpected effort, irregular meals, or other factors. Low blood sugar can lead to impaired judgement or loss of consciousness, causing a driver to lose control of the car.

- ▶ It is important to talk with your doctor about any symptoms you are experiencing that might be related to your diabetes.
- ▶ Follow your doctor's advice about driving restrictions.



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**Questions:**

Has a doctor ever told you that you had a stroke?

*No*

*Yes*

Do you have paralysis, weakness, or mental difficulties due to stroke?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

A stroke can interfere with the ability to drive safely because of partial or complete paralysis, weakness, or mental difficulties.

- ▶ If you have had a stroke, it is important that you undergo a thorough assessment by a doctor to determine if you should be driving and under what conditions.
- ▶ Remember that impaired consciousness or decreased awareness, or confusion or dizziness, can make driving unsafe.
- ▶ Muscle strength and coordination are needed to control the car safely. A loss of control of the limbs caused by paralysis may not necessarily prevent you from driving safely, but vehicle controls may need to be adapted.



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**Question:**

Has a doctor ever told you that you have Parkinson's Disease?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Symptoms of Parkinson's include tremors, slowness of movement, and rigidity that can interfere with the ability to drive safely. These symptoms can greatly prolong reaction times so that a driver may be unable to respond quickly enough to changing conditions.

- ▶ It is important for you to be aware of changes in your symptoms.
- ▶ Report any changes to your doctor.
- ▶ Monitor with your doctor your ability to drive.

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**Questions:**

Has a doctor ever told you that you have seizure disorder or syncope?

No

Yes

In the past two years, have you had a blackout, fainting spell, or seizure?

No

Yes

**Feedback:**

Both seizure disorders and syncope involve a sudden loss of consciousness, a serious concern for driving safely. Studies show that, overall, drivers with seizure disorders have an increased risk of traffic accidents and injury. Every state in the US has some type of driving restriction for drivers with seizure disorder.

- ▶ If you have had a sudden loss of consciousness such as a blackout, fainting spell, or seizure, it is important that you see your doctor.
- ▶ If you have a seizure disorder, your doctor will need to figure out what type of seizures you have and what the best treatment should be.
- ▶ If you are having syncope, your doctor will need to assess all of your symptoms to determine whether you can drive safely.

**Questions:**

How often do you have difficulty staying awake when you want to?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*

At night, how often do you have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep?

*Never*      *Rarely*      *Sometimes*      *Often*

Has anyone ever told you that you snore loudly?

*No*      *Yes*

In the past two years, have you ever fallen asleep while driving?

*No*      *Yes*

Has a doctor ever told you that you have sleep apnea or narcolepsy?

*No*      *Yes*

**Feedback:**

Sleep apnea and narcolepsy can interfere with the ability to drive safely. Sleep apnea involves the relaxation of the muscles of the throat during sleep, causing breathing to stop. Such sleep disturbances lead to excessive daytime sleepiness and the possibility of suddenly falling asleep without warning. People with sleep apnea syndrome have an increased risk of traffic accidents.

Narcolepsy also results in excessive sleepiness. While some people with narcolepsy are able to force themselves to stay awake through strong motivation and various measures (for example, open windows or cold air), they can be subject to sleep attacks without warning, placing them at high risk for traffic accidents. Medications used to treat narcolepsy may impair driving.

- ▶ Accurate diagnosis and treatment of sleep apnea and narcolepsy is essential, and requires overnight sleep assessment.
- ▶ Driving restrictions may be necessary.
- ▶ Remember that most methods people use to stay awake while driving only work for a short period of time, and sometimes not at all.

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**Questions:**

Has a doctor ever told you that you have dementia or Alzheimer's disease?

No

Yes

**Feedback:**

Dementia and Alzheimer's disease seriously interfere with short-term memory and clear judgments that are essential to minute-to-minute driving decisions.

- ▶ It is important that you have your doctor evaluate your mental and physical health regularly.
- ▶ Always follow your doctor's orders regarding driving.
- ▶ Drive when traffic is less stressful and avoid difficult road conditions.
- ▶ Keep your driving trips short and direct.
- ▶ Do not drive too fast or too slow.
- ▶ Drive defensively—anticipate situations.
- ▶ Use family, friends, and neighbors as important resources for feedback about your driving.
- ▶ You should not drive at all if significant memory loss, disorientation or cognitive impairment exists. If you are unsure, you should have a driving evaluation with regular follow-ups.

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**Question:**

Do you take any medications for your heart or high blood pressure (other than aspirin)?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Some heart and blood pressure medications can cause dizziness, drowsiness, or mood changes that could affect your driving ability.

- ▶ Make sure to read medication labels and follow directions carefully.
- ▶ It is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of the drug(s) you are taking, especially effects that could impair driving abilities.
- ▶ Also ask what, if anything, you can do to counter side effects that affect driving.
- ▶ Consider checking with your doctor about changing the time you take your medication so that it does not interfere with driving.
- ▶ Never stop your medication or change the dosage without checking with your doctor.

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**Questions:**

Do you ever take any medications for anxiety (such as Valium, Xanax, Klonopin, Ativan, etc.)?

*No*

*Yes*

Do you ever take any medications to help you sleep (such as Halcion, ProSom, Ambien, etc.)?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Studies suggest that drugs for anxiety or sleep problems increase the risk of traffic accidents. In addition, the interactions between some of these drugs and alcohol can be dangerous.

- ▶ Make sure to read medication labels and follow directions carefully.
- ▶ It is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of the drug(s) you are taking, especially effects that could impair driving abilities.
- ▶ Also ask what, if anything, you can do to counter side effects that affect driving.
- ▶ Consider checking with your doctor about changing the time you take your medication so that it does not interfere with driving.
- ▶ Never stop your medication or change the dosage without checking with your doctor.

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**Question:**

Do you ever take any medications for depression (such as Prozac, Pamelor, Elavil, Zoloft, etc.)?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Drugs for depression can lead to problems with attention, memory, and motor coordination. While there are differences among these drugs, studies show that in general, they impair driving performance and increase the risk of traffic accidents. This risk appears to increase as the dosage of medication increases.

- ▶ Make sure to read medication labels and follow directions carefully.
- ▶ It is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of the drug(s) you are taking, especially effects that could impair driving abilities.
- ▶ Also ask what, if anything, you can do to counter side effects that affect driving.
- ▶ Consider checking with your doctor about changing the time you take your medication so that it does not interfere with driving.
- ▶ Never stop your medication or change the dosage without checking with your doctor.

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**Question:**

Do you ever take any medications for allergies or allergic symptoms?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Older antihistamines are well known to cause drowsiness and impair driving ability. Newer antihistamines should be used in preference.

- ▶ It is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist to see what type of antihistamine you are taking.
- ▶ Make sure to read medication labels and follow directions carefully.
- ▶ It is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of the drug(s) you are taking, especially effects that could impair driving abilities.
- ▶ Also ask what, if anything, you can do to counter side effects that affect driving.
- ▶ Consider checking with your doctor about changing the time you take your medication so that it does not interfere with driving.
- ▶ Never stop your medication or change the dosage without checking with your doctor.

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**Questions:**

Do you ever take any prescription medications for pain, such as codeine?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Pain medications are widely used among older adults. Studies show that use of these may interfere with your ability to drive safely.

- ▶ Make sure to read medication labels and follow directions carefully.
- ▶ It is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of the drug(s) you are taking, especially effects that could impair driving abilities.
- ▶ Also ask what, if anything, you can do to counter side effects that affect driving.
- ▶ Consider checking with your doctor about changing the time you take your medication so that it does not interfere with driving.
- ▶ Never stop your medication or change the dosage without checking with your doctor.

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**Question:**

How many different prescription drugs do you take?

*None*

*One*

*Two or more*

**Feedback:**

As we age, our body chemistry changes and drugs have stronger effects than when we were younger. We also tend to take more medications. In high doses, or when combined, drugs can impair the skills and reflexes of otherwise good drivers. Many drugs can cause drowsiness, affect vision, and have other side effects that are serious hazards on the road but may go unnoticed. They may even impair our ability to decide whether we can drive safely.

- ▶ Make sure to read medication labels and follow directions carefully.
- ▶ Check with your doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of the drugs you are taking, especially effects that could impair driving abilities.
- ▶ Also ask what, if anything, you can do to counter side effects that affect driving.
- ▶ Closely monitor your reactions and report them to your doctor or pharmacist.
- ▶ Take medicine only in prescribed amounts at the proper times.
- ▶ Consider checking with your doctor about changing the time you take your medication so that it does not interfere with driving.
- ▶ Never stop your medication or change the dosage without checking with your doctor.
- ▶ Do not drive when using prescription drugs that make you sleepy or affect your ability to drive.

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**Questions:**

Do you ever take over-the-counter medications for sleep, pain, or allergies?

*No*

*Yes*

Do you ever take any dietary or herbal supplements (such as St. John's Wort, Kava Kava, Valerian root, etc.)?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Not only do medications affect the way your body functions, but dietary and herbal supplements also do, and could lead to dangerous interactions. Your driving abilities could be affected.

- ▶ Make sure all of your doctors know about all the medications or supplements you are taking. Bring all your medications and supplements with you when you see your doctor.
- ▶ Ask your doctor or pharmacist to check for dangerous interactions.
- ▶ Make sure to read medication and supplement labels and follow directions carefully.
- ▶ Check with your doctor or pharmacist about the possible side effects of the medications or supplements you are taking, especially effects that could impair driving abilities.
- ▶ Also ask what, if anything, you can do to counter side effects that affect driving.
- ▶ Consider checking with your doctor about changing the time you take your medication so that it does not interfere with driving.
- ▶ Never stop your medication or change the dosage without checking with your doctor.

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**Questions:**

Do you drink alcoholic beverages?

*No*

*Yes*

**Feedback:**

Another drug that you may not think of as a drug, is alcohol. Alcohol has a powerful effect on our bodies, both physical and psychological. Alcohol is the single most important factor in fatal traffic accidents.

- ▶ As we age, our bodies handle alcohol differently, so we should drink less.
- ▶ Never drive after drinking. Make arrangements for someone else to drive if you know you will be drinking.
- ▶ It's important to avoid alcohol when taking medications. With few exceptions, combining alcohol and other drugs decreases driving abilities, and in some cases, can cause coma or death.

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## Questions and Answers

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**Q** I am a good driver but what can I do to be even safer on the road?

**A** Even safe drivers can do things to help prevent accidents. If you don't already do them, here are several things you can do to be safer on the road:

- Make sure your car is in good working order.
- Always use your safety belt.
- Try to drive during the safest times, such as during the middle of the day.
- Take a refresher driving course. Cars, roads, and traffic laws keep on changing. A refresher course is a good way to stay up with those changes. Contact your *American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)* or *American Automobile Association (AAA)* office or *Area Agency on Aging* to find out more about such courses.
- Continue to monitor your driving abilities with this workbook or testing given by a doctor or organization.
- Do not drive after drinking alcohol, when you are tired, or when you are not confident of your driving.

**Q** Some of my answers in the workbook led to the suggestion that I have a doctor's check up. How can I be sure that the doctor understands my concerns and addresses my needs?

**A** Doctor offices are very busy and it can sometimes seem as if doctors do not have enough time to talk with you about your concerns. Here are some suggestions for making sure that your concerns are addressed:

- Think about your relationship with your doctor as a partnership— your job is to actively ask questions and raise concerns. Your doctor's job is to help meet your needs.
- Write down and prioritize your questions and concerns (including medication issues) before your visit and bring them with you.
- Understand your insurance benefits—know, in general, what services are covered.
- Consider bringing another person with you to help listen, remember information, and be sure your concerns are addressed.
- Bring up your most important questions and concerns first.
- Be honest with your doctor so he or she can best help you. Remember that the information you share is confidential.
- Make sure your doctor knows that you drive.
- Take notes to refer to later. Ask your doctor to write down information for you.
- Find out how to contact your doctor if you have further questions, are having problems, or your treatment is not working.

**Q** I've thought about having an evaluation of my driving done, but I worry that my license might be taken away. What should I do?

**A** There are places where you can have your driving evaluated without the results being reported to the driver licensing agency. Contact a local driving school, geriatric center, *Area Agency on Aging*, or *AARP* or *AAA* office to find out about where you can have your driving evaluated in your area.

- Be open and honest with yourself about the results.
- If the evaluation shows that you are having driving problems, you should consider how you can change your driving to be most safe. The person giving you the evaluation should be able to give you suggestions.
- Keep in mind that there may be many ways for you to adapt or reduce your driving so that you can drive safely and keep your license.
- Remember, too, that one day you may have to stop driving completely in order to protect yourself and others from serious injury.

**Q**  
**A**

**If I decide to reduce or stop my driving, how can I still get around?**

Options for getting around will vary depending on where you live, where you need to go, and how well you can walk. Consider contacting a local *Area Agency on Aging* or AARP office about transportation options in your area. Here's what may be available and a brief description of each:

- *Buses, trains, and subways:* Each of these run on a set route with a set schedule and specific stops. These options require you to walk to and from stops. They are usually low cost and schedules and routes can be obtained by contacting the agency that runs the service.
- *Taxis and dial-a-ride:* These provide transportation from one place, such as your home, to another place, such as the store, and can include just you or other riders. Typically, you call the company that runs the service and tell them where you want to go and they come and pick you up and take you there for a fee. There is little walking involved. You may have a short wait to be picked up.
- *Community transportation:* Some communities have organizations that have set up programs to provide transportation for specific groups such as seniors. These programs are usually responsive to the needs of their riders. Check to see if your community provides such transportation.
- *Family, friends, and neighbors:* If you have family, friends, or neighbors nearby, they may be able to help out with transportation. Although you may not like to ask for a ride, you can do your part by paying for gas, lunch, or returning a different favor.
- *Walking and bicycles:* Depending on your health, you may be able to meet some of your needs through walking or riding a bicycle/tricycle. This option has the added benefit of helping you maintain your fitness.

**Q** My abilities and driving seem okay right now, but that could change. What can I do to make sure I have my transportation needs met in the future?

**A** In the same way that we plan for retirement, we should plan for meeting our future transportation needs. As we get older, we begin to reduce our driving, such as at nighttime, and some of us stop driving altogether. Here are some things to think about to help you plan for a future where your transportation needs are safely met:

- Continue to be aware of and check your driving abilities, since they can change quickly. This workbook can help you. Any ability that you think may be declining should be assessed by a doctor or other qualified person.
- Stay in practice, even if your spouse or someone else prefers to do the driving right now. Keeping up your driving skills will help you drive safely in the future when you may need to drive more.
- When deciding about where to live, think about how you could get around if you were unable to or chose not to drive yourself. For example, would there be other transportation options such as buses or taxis available at night or in bad weather? Would family or friends be close by to help out?
- Begin riding the bus, taxi, subway, or train every now and then, so that you become familiar with these options for getting around in case you need them in the future.

**Q**  
**A**

**I know someone whose driving has become worse. What can I do to help that person?**

If you know someone who is having problems with driving, let the person know you are concerned. Talking with someone about his or her unsafe driving may not be easy but it can provide important information for the person. Here are some ways you can help:

- Give the person a copy of this workbook. Let him or her work through it alone or offer to help.
- Talk with the person's spouse or friends about whether they have noticed unsafe driving. Discuss with them how to approach the driver.
- Offer to provide occasional transportation.
- If you are concerned about someone who is a family member, talk with his or her doctor to see if the doctor will bring up driving during their next visit.
- Help the person begin to plan for reducing driving.