

Activities of Daily Living & Other Problems

Driving & dementia

Dementia impacts on both mobility and safety and it is important to consider both of these factors when faced with the issue of continued driving. When people have been driving for many years, they may not want to stop. Many people with dementia are able to drive safely for some time after diagnosis. As dementia progresses, the ability to drive safely will eventually be lost and driving must stop by law.



For experienced drivers, driving may seem to be a largely automatic activity. In fact, driving is a complicated task that requires a split-second combination of complex thought processes and manual skills.

To drive, people need to be able to make sense of, and respond to, everything they see, to 'read the road', to follow road signs, to anticipate and react quickly to the actions of other road users, to take appropriate action to avoid accidents, and to remember where they are going.

As dementia progresses, there are serious effects on memory, perception and the ability to perform even simple tasks. It is not surprising, therefore, that people with dementia eventually lose the ability to drive.

The decision to give up driving should, if possible, be made by the person with dementia. If the person needs to be persuaded to give up or actually prevented from driving, this will need to be done as tactfully as possible.

When to stop driving

A diagnosis of dementia is not in itself a sufficient reason to prevent someone from driving. What matters, from both a legal and a practical point of view, is whether or not an individual is still able to drive safely.

Many people with dementia retain learned skills and are able to drive safely for some time after diagnosis. Ultimately, however, their condition will deteriorate and they will have to stop driving. The stage at which this happens will be different for each person with dementia. Regular reviews of a person's continuing ability to drive are needed.

The evidence as to whether people with dementia who drive add to the overall risk on the roads is controversial, and most of the data suggests there is no major added hazard as, more often than not, people with dementia (in conjunction with their families) often withdraw from driving. However, to facilitate this process (as well as to consider other ways that mobility needs might be met after driving cessation), it is preferable to raise this issue as early as possible with the GP or specialist. Geriatricians and psychiatrists of old age are increasingly incorporating assessments for driving ability into their specialist assessment.

Reducing the risks

Most people with dementia who continue to drive do so responsibly and take steps to minimise their risk. Short drives on familiar roads at quiet times of the day generally present fewer problems than long, unfamiliar or very busy journeys.

People on certain types of drug treatment, such as night sedation or tablets for anxiety or depression or other psychiatric disorders may find that their driving ability is affected. It is worth seeking medical advice to see if anything can be done about this.

Licensing requirements

Any person who holds a current driving licence or wishes to apply for a new licence must comply with current guidelines pertaining to Health & Fitness.

The guidelines state that anyone suffering from any condition, including dementia, which could lead to impairment of judgement, behaviour or adaptability is required to undergo a medical assessment.

When a person reaches 70, licence renewal requires a medical certificate at intervals of one to three years. It would be prudent to discuss the issue of dementia and medications with the doctor issuing the certificate and in most instances the licence will be for one year. Under 70, the person with dementia and their carer should discuss medications and the possibility of a specialist assessment with their family doctor.

Insurance

Anyone who receives a diagnosis of dementia should immediately consult their insurance policy on what action is required by their insurer in such a situation. Failure to disclose this information may jeopardize the validity of their policy. Remember, it is a criminal offence to drive without at least third-party cover.

Encouragement to stop driving

Some people with dementia decide quite independently that they no longer want to drive. Others need a little, or a lot, of encouragement from family members, other carers or friends. The person's doctor may also be able to help.

When trying to encourage someone to give up driving, it is important to acknowledge that the person may find this difficult. They may have relied on driving as their main means of transport for much of their lives.

Giving up driving may seem especially hard if physical infirmities make it difficult to use public transport. And poor public transport in some areas may make it difficult for anyone to get about without a car.

People who have to give up driving are often unhappy about the loss of independence that this may bring. Encouraging people to take charge of their new transport arrangements - perhaps by opening and managing their own taxi account - may be helpful.

Some people with dementia will respond to the harsh argument that the risks of having an accident, in which they or other people could be seriously injured or even killed, are now too great for them to continue driving.

When persuasion fails

For some people with dementia, no amount of persuasion can convince them that it is no longer safe for them to drive. Eventually, as their disease progresses, they will probably forget all about driving. However, until they do so, driving can become an extremely trying issue for all concerned.

If it becomes necessary to prevent someone from driving, it may be worth considering the following strategies:

- Suggest that public transport or a taxi may be more convenient.
- Hide the car keys.
- Keep the car in a different place.
- Immobilise the car by removing the main distributor lead and tucking it away inside the engine.
- Suggest that you drive when you go out together because you need the practice.
- Sell the car, perhaps having first arranged for it to break down so that it needs to be taken to the garage.
- Replace the car with a new one that is a different model and colour.

In Ireland, only a District Court can remove a driving licence and while theoretically this is an option, in practice the person with dementia who persists in driving when clearly hazardous may be oblivious to the need for a driving licence. An approach by a senior Garda in the local Garda station may be helpful in these circumstances.