

Alzheimer's
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Programs and
Services

Helpline

Support Groups

Early Stage Memory
Loss Program

Care Management

Family Counseling

Speakers Bureau

Educational
Workshops and
Training Programs

Research

Advocacy

Making Difficult Decisions Regarding Driving *Should My Loved One Continue to Drive?*

At some point, all families caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease are forced to confront the difficult issue of driving.

The question for many families is when? With more people being diagnosed earlier in the disease process due to increased public and physician awareness, does a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease automatically mean driving is forbidden?

While there are conflicting opinions about whether someone with Alzheimer's should drive, a diagnosis does not necessarily mean that driving privileges should be instantly taken away (see related article on page 12). What it does mean is that caregivers must take steps immediately to assess the person's ability to drive and remain continually alert to warning signs of unsafe driving such as:

- *Forgetting how to locate familiar places*
- *Failing to recognize and/or observe traffic signals*
- *Making slow or poor decisions*
- *Driving at an inappropriate speed*
- *Becoming angry and confused while driving*

While many people are able to continue driving in the early stages of the disease, the unfortunate reality is that driving inevitably becomes difficult and eventually impossible for a person with Alzheimer's

due to progressive deterioration of cognitive and sensory skills. Families need to consider the circumstances and the person's driving ability to determine at what point driving privileges must be modified or eliminated altogether.

Tips to Discourage and Prevent Driving

When it is apparent that the person with Alzheimer's is unable to drive safely and responsibly, there are techniques caregivers can employ to discourage and, if necessary, prevent their loved one from driving. These include:

- *Talking directly to your loved one about your concerns.* Acknowledge their importance in the decision making process.
- *Having your loved one's driving ability tested.* Investigate testing services available in your community. For example, Foote Hospital in Jackson offers a driver assessment program for seniors and special needs drivers called "The Extra Mile."
- *Arranging for other transportation.* Offer alternatives to driving such as using a taxi or hiring a driver, or offer your time to drive.
- *Asking a physician to write a "do not drive" prescription.* Involve your physician in the process by asking him/her to write a letter or prescription stating that your loved one **must** not drive.

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Making Difficult Decisions Regarding Driving

(continued from page 1)

- **Controlling access to the car keys.**

Designate one person who will do all the driving and give that individual exclusive access to the car keys.

- **Moving the car.** Drive the car to another block, a neighbor's driveway, a private garage or lot.

- **Disabling the car.** If the person remains insistent on driving, you can remove the distributor cap or the battery to disable the car. Or ask a mechanic to install a "kill wire" that will prevent the car from starting unless a switch is thrown. Or give the person a set of keys that looks like the old set, but doesn't work to start the car.

Taking the Next Step

It can be difficult for families to find the balance between maintaining independence and ensuring safety. However, the ultimate priority must be to protect your loved one and countless others on the road.

With this in mind and having exhausted all other strategies, it may become necessary to consider having your loved one's drivers license revoked by the state. Here are steps that can be taken knowing

that the identity of the person making the complaint will not be revealed to the person with Alzheimer's:

1. Visit the local Secretary of State's Office and pick up Form OC 88.
2. Complete the form and send it to the Bureau of Driver Improvement.
3. The Bureau will review the form and if they think it has merit, they will send a letter to the person who the complaint was lodged against.
4. The person with the questionable driving will be requested to fill out forms, have their doctor fill out forms, and appear at the Bureau of Driver Improvement on a specific date.
5. If the person ignores or forgets these papers, their license will be suspended effective the date of their appearance at the Bureau.
6. If the person maintains their appointment, they will be given eye tests, written tests, and an actual driving test.
7. Depending on the results of this test, the person will either keep his license, keep his license but with restrictions deemed appropriate by the Bureau or have his license revoked.

Resources

"At the Crossroads, a Guide to Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia & Driving"
The Hartford, 2000

"Just the Facts and More - Driving"
Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Inc., 1992

"Should My Loved One Continue to Drive"
South Central Pennsylvania Alzheimer's Association, 1998

To obtain these and other resources, contact the chapter office at (734) 677-3081 or (800) 337-3827.



From: "Just the Facts and More - Driving," Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, Inc., 1992.