

Behind the wheel



Tips for safe and confident driving in later life



Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

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About this guide

Driving gives you the freedom to go where you want to, at the time of your choosing. And in later life, your ability to drive may feel even more important to your sense of independence. Having a car can make it easier to get to the shops or appointments, and to keep in touch with friends and family.

This guide covers things you can do to help you feel safe and confident when driving, and what the alternatives might be if you do decide to stop driving in the future. This decision should be based only on your ability to stay safe on the roads, not on your age.

We spoke to people about their experiences of driving in later life. Their quotes appear throughout.

In this guide you'll find references to our other publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789** or visiting independentage.org/information.

Driving and your confidence

Even if you have a long record of safe driving, it's possible to lose confidence in your driving ability as you get older.

Perhaps you find the roads too busy and this makes you anxious or stressed behind the wheel. Or if you have had a break from driving, because of illness, for example, it can take time to get your confidence back. This may also be true if you're more used to being a passenger than the driver, and you suddenly find that you need to do more of the driving yourself.

If you have been involved in an accident or near miss, or are starting to find your car more difficult to drive, you may be questioning whether you should continue driving.

Other people's opinions can also have an impact. Sometimes worried friends or relatives can wrongly assume you're no longer safe to drive, simply because of your age. But there are things you can do to reassure yourself and others that you're safe to carry on (see chapter 2).

60 years ago you could go a long way without meeting another car. Nowadays there are loads of signs, roundabouts and other hazards. Anybody who drives a car today needs to be really on the ball.

Geoffrey, 93

Changes to your health

If your health is not what it used to be, you may be unsure whether you should continue driving. Everyone ages differently, but common things that could affect your driving ability include:

- changes to your eyesight or hearing
- stiffness, cramps or pain in your joints, neck, back or muscles
- finding you take longer to react to things or process information and make decisions
- getting tired more easily, or finding it hard to concentrate for long periods of time

- developing new health conditions, such as diabetes or Parkinson's disease
- needing to take medications that could cause drowsiness or affect your concentration
- changes to your brain that can affect your ability to spot hazards, your spatial awareness or your memory.

In the next chapter, we look at ways to deal with these possible changes while continuing to drive.



2 Ways to stay safe and boost your confidence

There are some simple steps you can take to help you feel confident and in control behind the wheel.

Have a health MOT

If you have health concerns, or have aches and pains while driving, talk to your GP sooner rather than later. Getting help early could keep you on the road safely for longer. If you have recently been diagnosed with a new health condition – such as dementia, Parkinson’s disease, arthritis or diabetes – ask your GP whether it might affect your driving ability or safety. You should also contact the DVLA to check whether it is a medical condition that they need to know about. See chapter 3 for more information about reporting medical conditions.

Having health conditions doesn’t usually mean you can’t or shouldn’t drive – you just need to be aware of how your condition could affect your driving, and make adjustments where you need to. We look at the types of changes you could make later in this chapter.

If you're taking a lot of medication and you're not sure of the impact this could have on your driving, ask your GP or pharmacist for a medication review. They can tell you if there is a risk that any of your medicines could affect your alertness or concentration.

Testing your eyes and ears

Even if you have no concerns about your eyesight or hearing, it's important to get them checked regularly. You may not notice changes that happen gradually, but they can have an impact on your safety when driving. Cataracts, for example, usually develop slowly in your eye over years. They can cause blurred sight, make it harder to see in dim light and make glare from bright lights uncomfortable to look at. Some people experience double vision. You may find it more difficult to drive, particularly when light is fading and at night.



While I had cataracts, I gave up night driving because the headlights and street lights coming towards me looked like Christmas tree lights.

Jean, 77

Everyone over 60 is entitled to a free NHS eye test. Usually these are every two years, but if you're over 70 or have certain health conditions (such as diabetes or a family history of glaucoma), the NHS might recommend that your eyes are tested more often. The law is very clear about how good your eyesight must be in order to drive. See chapter 3 for details.

Brake, the road safety charity ([01484 559909](tel:01484559909), brake.org.uk), recommends that you check your hearing once a year. Having good hearing can increase your awareness of what is happening on the road around you. For example, being able to hear sirens will make you aware more quickly if an emergency vehicle is approaching.

Action on Hearing Loss has an online hearing check (actiononhearingloss.org.uk) which tells you if you may have some level of hearing loss, and what to do next. Many opticians also offer free hearing tests. If you're having problems with your hearing, speak to your GP. They can check your hearing and may refer you to a hearing specialist.

Keep active

Exercising is important as it may help reduce stiffness and keep the muscle strength you need to steer, change gear, and twist your neck and body while driving (for example, to look over your shoulder).

Exercise may also help to keep your reflexes as sharp as possible, so that you can quickly react to what is happening on the road.

Even a small amount of exercise each day could make a big difference to how you feel behind the wheel. You could ask your GP for ideas about activities or exercises that are suited to your abilities.

Change your driving habits

If you find driving tiring or stressful, reducing the amount you drive or changing your driving habits could help.

One of the big things for me is that I don't like being distracted. I know that I can't give driving my full concentration if I'm chatting and I don't particularly like music on either when I'm driving.

Angela, 69

Avoid busy times of the day – such as the morning and evening rush hour – and try to avoid driving in bad weather or in the dark. Night vision gets worse with age, so daytime driving could be safer.

Stick to roads that you know well wherever possible. And if you need to go on a long journey, make sure you have planned your route.

You should also plan where you will stop for a break if you need it. The Highway Code recommends a break of at least 15 minutes after every two hours of driving.

I don't do motorways. I really don't like them. It might be lack of confidence, as well as the speed and the fast approaches you have to make to join the traffic.

Wynne, 72

If you can't easily drive the distances you used to, you could consider driving to a local station and getting a train or coach the rest of the way. Driving regularly is important so that you don't lose your skills and confidence behind the wheel. Even if a family member or friend does most of the driving, make sure you drive often enough to stop your skills from getting rusty.

Get a professional opinion

A driver assessment can be a good way to get advice on how to improve your driving, and reassure yourself and those around you that your driving is safe.

The assessment usually takes place in your own car and lasts up to an hour. The assessor will give you tips to sharpen your driving skills in a report at the end of the assessment. A driver assessment generally costs between £40 and £60.





The assessment is non-threatening – there is no pass or fail, just advice to help keep you safe. If you are unable to turn your neck, it might be that you could make use of a blind spot mirror on your door mirrors and position your car differently at a junction so that you can see more.

Stuart, RoSPA driver assessor

Organisations providing driver assessments:

- RoSPA (0121 248 2099, rospa.com)
- IAM RoadSmart (0300 303 1134, iamroadsmart.com)
- Local councils provide assessments in some areas.

You can find a driver assessment near you on the Older Drivers website (www.olderdrivers.org.uk/driver-assessment/find-a-driver-assessment).

If you don't want to have a driver assessment, you could use the tool on the Older Drivers website to assess for yourself how safe your driving is (www.olderdrivers.org.uk/driver-assessment/self-assessment).

Or you could consider taking a refresher driving course. If you've been out of practice or just need to brush up on some of your driving skills, there are a range of options out there. You could find a course that focuses on a particular skill such as parking, or a course aimed at people who are nervous behind the wheel. Some local driving schools will offer refresher training for

experienced drivers, and your local council's road safety department may offer courses. Both RoSPA and IAM RoadSmart also run advanced driving courses, where you get training from a local group of qualified advanced drivers – see opposite for contact details.



Specialist driving assessments

If you have a medical condition that could affect your driving or you're disabled, a more detailed driving assessment at a mobility centre may be more suitable for you. A specially trained driving instructor will assess how your condition affects your driving, and a health or care professional

such as an occupational therapist could also be involved. The assessor may recommend adaptations that could be made to your car to make driving easier, or give you tips about things you can do to improve your safety.

These assessments are available at all our centres. The service is also available to those who have no disability, such as older drivers who want to ensure that their driving is still safe and consider options if it is not.

Edward Trehwella, CEO Driving Mobility.

You may benefit from this type of driving assessment even if you don't have any specific medical conditions that could affect your driving – if you think, for example, that some adaptations to your car would be helpful.

There is a generally a charge for the assessment, but the price varies between mobility centres.

Contact Driving Mobility to find your local mobility centre and arrange an assessment (0800 559 3636, drivingmobility.org.uk).

Car adaptations

A wide range of simple adaptations can be made to a car. For example, you could have a steering ball installed so that you don't need to turn the whole steering wheel, or you could have the foot pedals adjusted, or get an adjusted seat to make it easier to get in and out of the car.

If your driving assessment at a mobility centre shows that you could benefit from adaptations to your car, they will talk to you about how to get them fitted and the potential costs. You must inform the DVLA if you need to have special controls fitted or any changes made to a car so that you can continue to drive. There are questions about this in the DVLA form for reporting certain medical conditions (see chapter 3).

You may be able to join the Motability scheme (0300 456 4566, motability.co.uk) if you get the higher or enhanced rate mobility component paid with your disability benefit (PIP or DLA),

or if you get armed forces independence payment or war pensioners' mobility supplement. You lease a new car which can be adapted for your needs, in exchange for all or some of your mobility benefit. This will depend on the cost of your chosen vehicle. Usually, you need to have at least 12 months left to run on your disability benefit to apply for the Motability scheme.

If you're not receiving any of these benefits but have mobility problems, it might be worth having a benefits check. Call Independent Age on **0800 319 6789** to discuss disability benefits, or use our online benefits calculator at independentage.org/benefit-check to get an idea of what you may be entitled to.

If you are getting all of the benefits you're entitled to and need help to pay for adaptations to your car, you could find out whether there are any grants available to help you. Contact Turn2Us (**0808 802 2000, turn2us.org.uk**) or Charity Search (**0117 9824060, charitysearch.org.uk**) for advice.

Read our factsheet **Extra help with essential costs if you're on a low income** too.

Changing your car

The technology available in newer cars, such as power steering, automatic gears and parking sensors, can make driving a little easier. A car with bigger mirrors and windows might also be helpful, and choosing a car with a high roof-line or rotating seats could make getting into your seat easier.

Many modern cars can have safety features added such as emergency brake assist, a lane departure warning system, or blind spot alert systems. These features may come at extra cost when you buy a new car.

Don't feel you have to use all the technology features of a newer car – many have in-built satellite navigation systems, for example, which you may find more stressful or distracting than useful while you are driving.

If you can't afford or don't want a new car, there are small pieces of equipment available that could help you – things like a hand grip to help you get into and out of the car, or a swivel cushion attached to the seat. You can get advice on gadgets to help from a mobility centre (see page 17 for contact details).

Neil's story

"I had a stroke about seven years ago. It was a bad one. I can't use my right arm at all and my right leg isn't as strong as it used to be. I was told to give my licence back to the DVLA, and I thought that was it for me driving. I had to be nagged to surrender my licence – I didn't want to admit that I might not be able to drive again.

"But it wasn't as bad as I thought. Within a few months, the DVLA sent me some forms to fill in to reapply for my licence, which my wife helped me with. I also had to send them a note from my GP about whether he thought I was okay to drive.

"The DVLA asked me to see another doctor that they had chosen, to get his opinion about if I was fit to drive. They also said I needed to have a driving assessment. I was nervous about the driving assessment, but it went well. They checked my eyesight, asked me some questions, like how long I'd been driving for, and took me out on the road for a drive. The car I had the assessment in was an automatic – I'd never driven one before so it took a while to get used to it. It also had a steering ball attached to the wheel so I could control the car with one hand.



Picture posed by model

"The lady who did the assessment sent a report back to the DVLA, and I got my new licence soon after that. That licence expired after three years as they wanted to make sure that my circumstances hadn't changed. But my licence now will last longer.

"Now we've got a car with automatic gears – as well as automatic headlights and windscreen wipers so I can drive easily with just the one hand. My steering ball has the indicators, horn and full beam lights on it too.

"I do get tired when I drive so I don't drive as much as I used to. But it's nice to know I can pop to the shops when I need to or drive down to the leisure centre for a swim."

Renewing your licence

Your driving licence automatically expires when you reach 70. Once you've renewed it, you have to reapply every three years.

To renew your licence, you must answer questions about your health and eyesight, and declare that you are still fit to drive. But don't let this put you off continuing to drive – it's free to reapply and there is no driving test or medical examination.

The DVLA will automatically send you the application form to renew your licence 90 days before your 70th birthday. You can return this form by post or apply online at [gov.uk/renew-driving-licence-at-70](https://www.gov.uk/renew-driving-licence-at-70).

Although you don't need to have a medical examination to reapply for your licence, this might be a good time to have a check-up. Being honest about your health and confronting any potential problems when driving is the best way to keep yourself and others safe on the road.



Eyesight rules

To drive legally, you must be able to read a car number plate made after 1 September 2001 from 20 metres away. Number plates made before this date were slightly bigger.

You must also meet the minimum eyesight standard for driving which is set by the government, and have an adequate field of vision. An optician will be able to tell you if you meet these requirements. If you don't, you'll need to surrender your licence (see page 27).

If you need to wear glasses or contact lenses to meet these standards, make sure you wear them every time you drive.

Reporting medical conditions

You need to tell the DVLA if you develop any medical conditions that could affect your ability to drive safely. You must also tell them if an existing condition that they may already know about has got worse.

Conditions you need to report to the DVLA include:

- epilepsy
- stroke – if you're still having problems a month afterwards
- other neurological and mental health conditions (eg Parkinson's disease or dementia)
- diabetes – if you're treated with insulin
- physical disabilities (eg a spinal condition)
- visual impairments (eg cataracts, macular degeneration, glaucoma or another problem in both of your eyes)
- cancer – if your doctor says you're not able to drive.

I spoke to my doctor after my heart attack. I didn't need to report it to the DVLA but I had to stop driving for at least a month.

Rob, 70



If you're not sure whether you need to declare your medical condition, it's best to check. You can be fined up to £1,000 if you don't tell the DVLA about a medical condition that could affect your driving. Call the DVLA drivers' medical enquiries helpline on **0300 790 6806** or check the list of conditions at **[gov.uk/driving-medical-conditions](https://www.gov.uk/driving-medical-conditions)**. There are different forms to fill in depending on your medical condition.

Dad needed a pacemaker and a heart valve replacement, so I called the DVLA on his behalf to check that he was still okay to drive before he had the operation. They told me that Dad should check this with his GP, who said that he was fine as long as he stayed away from stressful situations.
Sara, daughter of older driver

Declaring a medical condition doesn't necessarily mean that you need to give up driving. The DVLA will consider whether you meet the required standards for driving. They may contact your doctor, or ask you to have an eye test. They could also ask you to have a driving assessment at a mobility centre (mentioned in chapter 2). Once they've considered your case, the DVLA will write to you with their decision. They may say you need to have a new or shorter driving licence, or that you need to have your car adapted in order to continue driving. Or they may say you need to stop driving.

Giving up your licence

You must give up your licence if the DVLA decide that you don't meet the required standards for driving because of your medical condition. You must also give up your licence if your doctor tells you to stop driving for three months or more, or if you don't meet the eyesight standards. You'll need to fill in the 'declaration of voluntary surrender' form and send it to the DVLA along with your licence.

Your doctor could report you to the DVLA if you continue driving after they have told you to stop, and they are concerned that you pose a serious risk to other road users.

You can reapply for your licence if you meet the medical standards for driving again in the future. You'll get a letter from the DVLA telling you how long you need to wait before reapplying. The letter will also tell you if there is anything else you need to do before applying for a new licence, such as sending evidence of your fitness to drive from your GP.

4 If it's time to stop driving

Giving up driving would be a sad day for me. But I'd have to keep busy. I can't stay still.

Gordon, 92

Unless you are medically unfit to drive, you should be the one to decide when it's time to stop driving. If you're unsure about whether or not to continue driving, talk to friends and family or your GP. Other people can help you to see problems that you may not have noticed yourself. If those close to you express concern about your driving, try to take on board what they have to say, even if it's hard to hear. Their concern will be for your safety, and that of other road users.

Deciding to stop driving is a huge step to take. It can feel like a loss of independence and may mean making changes to your lifestyle.

As drivers, we all need to be sure that we are fit to drive even if we have been driving for many years without incident. We must not become complacent about our abilities.

Sgt Rob Heard, Road Safety Sergeant

Planning ahead can make this seem less daunting. Think about how you would get to the places you usually go to if you could no longer drive, and look into local transport options. You could even try a week without your car and see how you manage.

If you need to give up driving and are struggling with your emotions, make sure that you talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling. Some people worry about becoming lonely or isolated if they are not able to get about in their car. If this concerns you, take a look at our guide **If you're feeling lonely** or our factsheet **How to stay socially connected** for tips and ideas for staying connected.

Other ways to get around

There are various options available for getting around without a car.

If you mainly make local trips, using a taxi could work out cheaper than running your own car.

You may be able to set up an account with a taxi company and agree a set price for your weekly journeys, for example. If you receive a disability benefit such as Attendance Allowance, you could choose to spend some of it on taxi fares or other ways of getting around. Contact us to check that you are getting all the benefits you are entitled to ([0800 319 6789](tel:08003196789), independentage.org).

For short distances, you could consider renting or buying a mobility scooter. You might want to try them out first, as they aren't right for everyone. There are equipment demonstration centres across the country – you can find details through the Disabled Living Foundation ([0300 999 0004](tel:03009990004), livingmadeeasy.org.uk). You may also be able to lease a scooter or powered wheelchair through the Motability scheme if you receive one of the qualifying benefits (see page 17). Read our factsheet **Choosing disability equipment** to find out more.

I gave up driving partly because of the cost. I wasn't driving all that much, and for the cost of the upkeep of the car and the insurance and everything, I can afford to take taxis everywhere I want to go. Taxis feel safer now that my legs aren't so stable anymore. And I have my mobility scooter for short trips to the shops.

Jo, 98

Community transport

Most areas have pre-bookable transport schemes like dial-a-ride buses or community cars. These are usually run by charities or voluntary organisations. Contact your local council to find out what is available near you. CT Online, a community transport search facility ([0161 351 1475](tel:01613511475), ctonline.org.uk), can help you find your local community-run transport service.

Using public transport



You can get a bus pass for free travel across the country once you reach the State Pension age for women (whether you're a man or a woman). State Pension age is gradually increasing, so when you qualify for your bus pass will depend on when you were born. Contact your local council to apply.

A Senior Railcard gives you a third off most train fares if you're 60 or over ([0345 300 0250](tel:0345300250), senior-railcard.co.uk). A one year railcard costs £30. A Senior Coachcard gives you a third off travel on National Express coaches and costs £10 ([0871 781 8181](tel:08717818181), nationalexpress.com/coachcards).

Traveline can provide you with local timetables, or help you to plan a journey by bus, rail, coach or ferry ([0871 200 2233](tel:08712002233), traveline.info).

Options may be more limited if you live in a rural area. If you're worried about being cut off, you could consider moving somewhere with better transport links before you give up driving. You might want to read our guide **Choosing where to live**, or contact us for advice ([0800 319 6789](tel:08003196789), independentage.org).

Make use of the internet

If you are worried about how you would manage to do your shopping if you could no longer drive, you could consider doing this online. Most supermarkets have cheaper delivery prices in the middle of the day, and using a delivery service could mean less heavy lifting. Most clothing chains, for example, can also deliver straight to your door or may offer cheaper delivery to a local newsagent or shop.

If you're not a confident computer user, there are courses available to help you to learn the basics and get started with using the internet. Abilitynet can arrange for a volunteer to visit you at home and help you with computer problems, or show you how to do what you want online ([0800 269 545](tel:0800269545), abilitynet.org.uk). Online Centres also provide free or low cost computer courses – contact the Online Centres Network to find your local centre ([0114 349 1666](tel:01143491666), onlinecentresnetwork.org).

Should you get a second opinion on your driving?

You regularly find yourself getting nervous or stressed behind the wheel.

You think your reaction times and reflexes are slowing down.

You think your eyesight is getting worse and may be affecting what you can see on the road.

Your hearing is getting worse and you're not as aware of what is happening on the road around you anymore.

Your family or friends seem concerned about your driving, or nervous when they are in a car with you.

You often get confused when driving (eg at a junction, or if there are roadworks), or get lost on a familiar route.

You find it difficult to spot road signs and follow them (eg – if there is a speed limit change).

Other drivers often react badly to your actions on the road.

You are finding your car more difficult to handle.

You have had several near misses or an accident.

If you have ticked any of the boxes in this checklist, it might be worth getting a second opinion on your driving. Ask your GP for advice, or consider having a driver assessment to get a professional's view on your safety behind the wheel.

Organisations providing driver assessments include RoSPA (**0121 248 2099, rospa.com**) and IAM RoadSmart (**0300 303 1134, iamroadsmart.com**).

Our free advice guides

Our practical, jargon-free advice guides give you the information you need to get the most out of older age.



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**To order your free advice guides, call
0800 319 6789 or visit independentage.org**

The information in this guide applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru ([0800 022 3444](tel:08000223444), agecymru.org.uk) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland ([0800 12 44 222](tel:08001244222), agescotland.org.uk).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI ([0808 808 7575](tel:08088087575), ageni.org).

We want the UK to be the best place to grow older and we have ambitious targets to increase the number of older people we help and the difference we make. We receive no state funding and rely on income from individuals, trusts and other sources to continue providing our services to hundreds of thousands of older people in need.

Visit independentage.org to make a secure online donation and find out about other ways to support us. Alternatively, you can call us on [020 7605 4223](tel:02076054223) or email supporters@independentage.org.



About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

For more information, visit our website **independentage.org**

Call us for information or to arrange free, impartial advice from an expert adviser. Lines are open 8am-8pm, Monday to Friday, and 9am-1pm, Saturday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **advice@independentage.org**



advice and support for older age

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