



# Drivers 65 Plus: Check Your Performance

A Self-Rating Tool with  
Facts and Suggestions for Safe Driving



*As a mature driver, you bring a wealth of experience to the driver's seat.*

By the year 2030, one of every five drivers in America will be 65 years of age or older. Freedom to travel by automobile will continue to be an important factor to maintain personal independence and mental health.

**The central idea of this booklet is to help you drive as long as safely possible.**

Age should never be used as the sole indicator of driving ability. In fact, drivers 65 and older represent a wide range of abilities, and no individual should have his or her driving privileges determined solely on their age. However, it is not uncommon for some of the skills necessary for safe driving – vision, reflexes, flexibility, and hearing – to begin to deteriorate as we age.

If you notice that you are beginning to experience some of these natural age-related changes, you can adjust your driving habits to keep driving safely – after all, one of the most critical assets for safe driving is experience, and experience does *not* decline with age. It's important to recognize your limitations and to be aware of everything you can do to be safe on the road.

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### Introduction

Think about what tasks you do every time you get behind the wheel of a car. You must coordinate the actions of your hands, feet, eyes, ears, and body movements. At the same time, you must decide how to react to what you see, hear, and feel in relation to other cars and drivers, traffic signs and signals, conditions of the highway, and the performance of your car.

These decisions are usually made close to other vehicles and must be converted quickly into action — brake, steer, accelerate, or a combination of these — to maintain or adjust your position in traffic. And these decisions must be made frequently.

As a mature driver, you bring a wealth of experience to the driver's seat; that is why, on average, drivers in their fifties and sixties have just about the lowest crash rates of anyone on the road. However, as some of the skills required for optimal driving performance begin to decline at older ages, research shows that crash rates begin to increase as drivers reach their late 60's or early 70's, and increase more rapidly after about age 75.

Additionally, your body is not as resistant to injury as it might have been 30 or 40 years ago. If you are involved in a crash, you are likely to suffer more serious injuries as compared to a younger person in a similar crash. This makes it increasingly important for you to do everything you can to keep your driving skills sharp and to minimize your chances of being involved in a crash in the first place.

### Purpose of this Booklet.

This self-rating form is designed to help you examine your ability to keep driving safely. Through knowledge and self-awareness, you can make better informed decisions about when to get behind the wheel and when to seek other forms of transportation.

The rating form on the next page is for your private use. Answer the 15 questions as honestly as possible. Use the rating guide to compute your score and to identify your strengths and weaknesses. Next, read the *Suggestions for Improvement* section that corresponds to each question to see how you can improve your driving.

**Now, please follow the instructions on pages 2 and 3.**



## Drivers 65 Plus: Suggestions for Improvement



### I signal and check to the rear when I change lanes.

Checking rearview and side mirrors, looking to the rear to cover the blind spots, and signaling well before your maneuver are the only ways to avoid hitting a car when changing lanes.

But why don't you do these things all the time? In some cases, you might simply forget. In observational studies older drivers report being unaware of having failed to look to the rear before changing lanes or backing up. Many of our driving habits are exactly that – habits. And we can stop being aware of our actions, especially if we've driven crash-free for a long time.

Many older drivers stop looking over their shoulders because of decreased flexibility. If you have arthritis, then you know how painful a quick look over the shoulder can be.

#### If looking over your shoulder to check for traffic is difficult for you, try to:

- Drive with a partner to act as a co-pilot whenever possible.
- Install extra-wide rearview mirrors and side mirrors to decrease your blind spots. You'll need to learn how to use the side mirrors correctly, because those of convex lens design can make objects appear smaller and farther away than they actually are.
- Ask your physician about medications and exercises that might improve your flexibility; the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has a brochure available online at [AAAFoundation.org](http://AAAFoundation.org) called *A Flexibility Fitness Training Package for Improving Older Driver Performance* to help you improve your flexibility.
- Take a re-training or refresher course that helps older drivers adjust to the limitations due to aging. Call your local AAA club to see if they offer a course.
- Make a concerted effort to be aware of your driving habits and decide to always look before changing lanes.



### I wear a seat belt.

Seat belts cut your risk of death nearly in half if you are involved in a serious crash, and of course, it's the law in nearly every state. Even if you plan to drive only short distances under ideal conditions, it makes sense to wear your seat belt every time you ride.

To provide optimal protection, seat belts should be worn properly with the shoulder belt across your shoulder and upper thigh bones, because serious injury can occur if not worn properly. Fastening your seat belts is unquestionably the single best way to protect yourself in a crash.

#### You can increase your chances of surviving a collision or reducing injury by taking the following steps:

- Wear your seat belt properly at all times.
- If your seat belt is extremely uncomfortable or cannot be properly fastened, take it to a competent mechanic for alterations. Many cars have adjustable shoulder belt mounts or you can buy devices that improve the fit.
- If your car does not have an automatic reminder to fasten seat belts, leave yourself a note on the dashboard or sun visor. Remind your passengers to buckle up.



Wear your seat belt correctly... across your shoulder and chest - NOT under an arm, across your hip bones - NOT your stomach. It's comfortable... it's easy.

\*New York Coalition for Safety Belt Use Medical Society. State of New York



### I try to stay informed on changes in driving and highway laws and techniques.

With new roads being built, new traffic signals being installed, and intersections being converted into traffic circles or roundabouts in an increasing number of cities, it is critical for you to continually refresh your knowledge of the roads and traffic patterns near where you drive.

Knowledge of signs and symbols can help you, especially if your ability to see them is diminishing. Sometimes, just knowing what the shapes of signs mean can help you anticipate their message. Familiarity and knowing what to do can eliminate hesitation and uncertainty when you need to make a quick decision.

#### We all want to share the road safely, so we need to understand traffic laws, devices, signs, and symbols. Here's how you can learn more about them:

- Call, visit or go online to your state's motor vehicle administration to obtain the current drivers licensing manual for your state. Study the manual as though you were taking the test. Ask if they have other ways for you to stay current.
- Take a re-training or refresher course. Contact your local AAA club to find a course near you or visit [AAASeniors.com](http://AAASeniors.com).
- Make a point of checking your local newspapers for changes in traffic patterns and special intersections or signage, so you feel prepared and confident.



### Intersections bother me because there is so much to watch from all directions.

Intersections are dangerous for all of us. You must interact with other drivers and pedestrians whose movements and decisions are difficult to anticipate. In fact, crashes at intersections are quite common among older drivers, especially when left-turns are required.

How comfortable you feel around intersections can be an early warning sign that you need a refresher course or other assistance. Listen to your instincts and take a good look at your driving skills. What bothers you most about intersections? Is it an inability to handle all the information quickly enough? Are you unsure about how to position the car for a left or right turn? Do you find it difficult to turn the steering wheel because of arthritis or some other physical problem? Is it hard to judge the speed of oncoming vehicles? Sometimes, this sort of analysis can lead you to solutions.

#### If you find intersections difficult, review the following steps for improvement:

- If one or two intersections on your regular routes give you particular trouble, study them while on foot. Watch the problems other drivers have to handle. Notice how the traffic signals assist drivers and pedestrians. This way you know in advance what the common problems are and how to handle them when they occur. This kind of analysis can help you handle other intersections as well.
- Plan your trips to avoid busy intersections or use them at less congested times. Plan an alternate route to avoid left turns from busy intersections. Remember that making three right turns can help you avoid turning left. In many places you will be able to do this by driving straight through the intersection, turning *right* at the next street, and then making two more right turns. Then, you end up driving straight through the original intersection in the direction that you originally wanted to go.
- Take a re-training or refresher course that helps older drivers adjust to the limitations of age. What you learn may give you the confidence to recognize that you can handle intersections correctly.



### I find it difficult to decide when to merge with traffic on a busy interstate highway.

Many drivers experience feelings of insecurity and nervousness about entering a busy interstate highway or any high-speed road. If you dislike the speed of traffic and the number of cars on interstates or have stopped using them entirely, then you will probably want to improve your skills so you can use them more confidently.

If you live where interstates are convenient to access and you travel them often, you probably have gained experience and feel confident about driving on them. However, if you drive them infrequently or not at all, you might be fearful of what you “don’t know” about them. More cars, faster traffic, and increased congestion can make interstates intimidating to any driver.

#### Here are some suggestions for improving your skills on interstate highways:

- If you decide that you do not know enough about interstates to drive on them safely and that reluctance to enter them is in part because of a fear of the unknown, take a refresher course to learn how to use them properly.
- If you feel you have the ability to drive on interstates, but want to improve your skills, ask another experienced driver whose opinion you trust to ride with you and suggest what you should and should not do. Then, practice when traffic is less congested.
- If you feel so uncomfortable on interstates that you feel you may be in danger, try to avoid them. There is always another, parallel route. You are your own best judge of whether they are safe for you, regardless of how safe they may be for others.



### I think I am slower than I used to be in reacting to dangerous driving situations.

Emergencies and dangerous situations may be relatively uncommon, but fast and safe reaction to them is essential. Most older drivers tend to have excellent judgment when driving. It is in reacting to emergencies that some older drivers most markedly demonstrate a slowing down.

Older drivers can have trouble integrating information from several sources at once, and therefore respond more slowly to dangerous situations.

Responding quickly to a traffic situation requires that several skills be sharp. First, you must see or hear the danger. Second, you have to recognize that the situation is dangerous and requires action. Third, you must decide how to act. And fourth, you must act appropriately. A slight slowing down in each of these skills can result in a much slower overall response time to traffic emergencies.



### What can you do to improve your “emergency” skills?

- Take a re-training or refresher course that helps older drivers adjust to the limitations of age. There, you can learn and practice ways to improve your ability to more rapidly anticipate and avoid dangerous situations.
- Visit *Roadwise Review Online* at [SeniorDrivers.org](http://SeniorDrivers.org), to use a free screening tool developed to help seniors measure certain mental and physical abilities important to driving, see end of this booklet for more information. A next step would be to visit an occupational therapist and have your physical and mental driving skills evaluated. In many cases, practice exercises can improve your skills. Many hospitals offer out-patient counseling.
- Avoid driving in congested, fast-moving traffic, whenever possible.
- Keep yourself physically fit and mentally stimulated. Avoid driving if you are tired, ill, have been drinking, or have taken any other drug that slows your mental or physical responses.
- Exercise to maintain or increase your muscular strength and the flexibility of your joints. Always check with your doctor before starting a new exercise program.
- If your joint and muscle impairments are serious, ask your doctor about medical, physical, and surgical therapies. Anti-inflammatory drugs and various surgical procedures can lessen impairment sufficiently to permit safe driving.
- Consult an occupational therapist or driver rehab specialist to equip your car with devices that compensate for losses of flexibility and strength and learn how to use them. Make sure your next car has power steering, power brakes, automatic seat adjustment, and other features to help you control your car better. See the information on *Smart Features for Mature Drivers* and *CarFit* at the end of this booklet.

### When I am really upset, it affects my driving.

It takes only a moment of inattention to produce a collision. As you age, experience and good judgment make you a better driver. However, if you were aggressive and hostile on the road when young, you are likely to be much the same today. The difference is that now, because of decreased driving skills, you may not have the ability to recover from those dangerous highway situations that arise out of aggression and hostility.

#### Take the following steps to minimize the impact of your emotions on driving safely:

- When you know that you are very emotional about something, delay driving until you have calmed down.
- Awareness is the first step toward controlling anger. The second step is handling it in a healthy manner, such as taking a walk several times around the block or more if necessary, or talking with a friend or a professional counselor. Getting behind the wheel in a highly emotional state, whether joy or anger, diverts attention from the task of driving and invites trouble.



## My thoughts wander when I drive.



Driving is a complicated and demanding task, requiring continuous concentration and even momentary lapses can lead to danger. Anyone can be distracted momentarily by accident, but the number one focus of all drivers should always be the important task of driving.

Of course, you have probably seen drivers in animated conversations or talking on cell phones and noticed how it affected their driving – driving erratically or drifting from their lanes. Other drivers drink coffee, groom themselves, or try to glance at reading materials while driving. In an emergency, these inattentive drivers may not be able to return from their diversion in time to take evasive action.

One area in which you have total control is your decision to give driving your full attention. Give driving the attention it deserves and you will buy yourself valuable seconds of reaction time in an emergency.

### There are several things you can do to keep your thoughts from wandering:

- Treat driving as a complicated task requiring your full attention.
- If you catch yourself daydreaming or otherwise failing to concentrate on your driving, identify what is distracting you and try to overcome it.
- Take the necessary steps to remove or reduce distractions, whether they are those over which you have control, such as turning off the radio, or those for which you will need help, such as dealing with emotional issues.
- As you drive, play the “What If” game to stay alert and mentally prepare for driving emergencies. Ask yourself what you would do if certain situations occurred.



## Traffic situations make me angry.

Anger behind the wheel comes out in dangerous ways. Most people trapped in slow-moving traffic feel frustrated, and this frustration can lead to anger at the situation. However, some people direct their anger at other people, instead of the traffic situation itself. This can lead to inappropriate reactions, honking horns, yelling at other drivers, cutting others off in traffic, or blocking intersections.

When drivers become overly-emotional in reaction to a situation, it is a clear sign that other emotions are the true cause and driving has become an outlet for expressing anger.

Many emotions can turn into anger. Fear of other drivers who are driving recklessly, can bring on violent anger. Anxiety over being late and anger at other situations in one’s life can also provoke unwarranted anger. All these emotions are counter-productive.

The worst part of anger is how drivers express it. If you find yourself driving erratically, driving too fast, or tailgating someone “to teach them a lesson,” then you need to stop and ask yourself: “Is it worth it?” Anyone with a heart condition knows that reacting to every little annoyance and frustration with anger can be dangerous; we all need to understand that reacting to driving situations with aggressive driving can be just as fatal as a heart attack.

### Fortunately, there are many things you can do to make driving less stressful and make your own responses less emotional:

- Accept the fact that anger will do nothing to get you out of irritating traffic situations. On the contrary, it may get you into collisions. Taking a few slow, deep breaths and forcing yourself to smile are excellent stress-relievers.
- Choose to be a responsible driver. Recognize when you are becoming angry. Then examine why anger seems to reach irrational proportions. Ask yourself: “Why am I getting upset?” Then, try to take the necessary corrective steps. Keep cool.
- Try to avoid the kind of traffic you know is likely to generate anger. The smoother the traffic flow, the less the anger, and the fewer the collisions.
- If you think that you might be converting fear of traffic into anger, take steps to boost your skills and confidence, such as taking a re-training or refresher course.



## I get regular eye exams to keep my vision at its sharpest.

Eighty-five to ninety-five percent of all sensing clues in driving come through the eyes. Poor visual capacity is directly related to poor driving. Reduced performance from faulty vision shows up in delayed response to signals, signs, and traffic events in ways that can lead to a collision.

Between ages 40 and 60 our night vision becomes progressively worse. Pupils become smaller, the muscles less elastic, and the lenses become thicker and less clear. A 60-year-old driver requires 10 times the light required by a 20-year-old.

As we age we also become more sensitive to glare, which makes driving at night difficult. Your eyes’ lenses can become thicker and yellowed with age, resulting in a fogging vision and sensitivity to glare. A 55-year-old takes eight times as long to recover from glare as a 16-year-old.

Drivers receive 98 percent of their visual communication through peripheral vision. Around age 70, peripheral vision can become a serious problem and those with poor peripheral vision have collision rates twice as high as those with normal peripheral vision.

Colors also become harder to see. For example, red colors do not appear bright to many older eyes, and it may take some senior drivers twice as long as it took in earlier years to detect the flash of brake lights.

Another visual ability that declines over the years is depth perception: how close or how far you are in relation to a car or object ahead. This capacity is especially critical when trying to judge how fast other cars are coming, which contributes to the problems you may have in making left turns.

Aging does bring vision problems, but we all share these difficulties in a fairly predictable, natural way. No matter how well you have taken care of your eyes, these problems will develop; however, seeing a doctor on a regular basis is the only way to be sure that your vision is the best it can be. Doctors cannot correct all vision problems, but only doctors can help you with those vision problems that are correctable, such as visual acuity (ability to focus) and disease-related vision loss.

**There are several things you can do to handle the loss of vision that comes with aging:**

- First and foremost, set up periodic examinations with your eye doctor. Tell the doctor that you are interested not simply in an eye-chart test, but in a thorough examination that will help you to remain a safe driver.
- Take the corrective steps recommended by your doctor. If eyeglasses are prescribed, keep them up to date by letting the doctor know at once if they are not working well for you. If your doctor recommends a cataract operation, keep in mind that this is a simple, out-patient procedure that may dramatically improve your vision.
- Enroll in an older driver training course where you can learn specific techniques for coping with the limits imposed by aging eyes. Attend a *CarFit* event, [car-fit.org](http://car-fit.org), to learn how to improve your comfort and safety behind the wheel, including properly adjusted mirrors to minimize blind spots in your field of view. You may also learn about how to use special devices, such as larger mirrors, that you can install.
- Accept the limits of "aging eyes," and reduce the amount of driving you do after dark and at twilight (one of the most dangerous times). The chances of having a collision are three times greater at night than in daytime.
- Avoid tinted windshields and always keep your windshield and headlights clean.



### **I check with my doctor or pharmacist about how the medications I take affect my driving ability.**

While you might be wary of the effects of prescription drugs, even over-the-counter drugs can reduce driving ability.

The drugs that slow us down generally also slow down or reduce our capacity to make decisions and process information rapidly. And quick decisions are needed to maneuver a vehicle safely. Tranquilizers or cold remedies, such as cold tablets, cough syrup, and sleeping pills, can reduce driving ability.

Combinations of drugs present another danger, because these combinations can bring on unexpected side effects and bad reactions. If you have more than one doctor prescribing medications without knowing what the others are prescribing, you could be in danger.

Another drug, which you may not think of as a drug, with this same effect is alcohol. Alcohol has a powerful impact on our total system, physical and psychological.

It is important to avoid alcoholic beverages when taking medications. With few exceptions, combining alcohol and other drugs significantly multiplies the impairment of your driving skills. The only safe practice is to avoid alcohol completely if there is any chance that you will have to drive. One's tolerance for alcohol decreases steadily with age. Food, mood, fatigue, medication, general health, weight, and size of body can all make a difference in predicting overall effect. Keep in mind the penalties of driving while impaired by alcohol or other drugs (medications included): heavy fines, jail sentences, and revocation of license.

**You can ensure that your medications are not combining to impair your driving skills by taking the following steps:**

- Check with your local pharmacist or physician to determine what the side effects of a prescribed medication might be and what, if anything, you can do to counter them, particularly as they apply to driving. Also visit [AAASeniors.com](http://AAASeniors.com) for information on medications and driving.
- If you have more than one physician prescribing medications, make sure all of them know about all the drugs you are taking, both prescribed and over-the-counter. Bring all your medicines with you when you go to the doctor.
- Read all labels and instructions on prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs to determine side effects and their relationship to whether you should drive. Keep in mind that combinations of medicines can magnify their effects beyond the individual warnings.
- Convince yourself that the only safe action is not to drink alcoholic beverages at all if you intend to drive, and to refuse to ride with anyone who has been drinking or who you suspect might be impaired by one or more drugs.



### **I try to stay informed of current information about health and wellness habits.**

What you eat, how much you exercise, and regular visits to the doctor (and following the doctor's advice) can help you keep driving longer and extend your life.

Individual lifestyles have a direct relationship to longevity and quality of life. It all begins with your attitude about how much control you believe you have over the quality of your life. It ends with how much of it you are willing to exercise.

We all want to be able to handle the demands of safe driving. To keep your license, you must remain alert and quick to respond in emergency situations. You also need to keep up to date about health habits that keep your mind and body in shape and able to handle the demands of safe driving.

True, this booklet has emphasized the reductions in driving skills that come with age. But even though research points to changes in the central nervous system as the culprits, you can reduce this slowing down with increased motivation to improve and stay in shape. Exercise reduces the extent of slowing, and extended exercise may eliminate it completely.

Learn to appreciate the close ties between personal health habits and driving skills. The same attitude that encourages you to remain informed on health practices will also help you to feel in control of your future as a driver. You can stay informed by following these steps:

- Be realistic about how much control you have and want in terms of health habits as they relate to your life in general and to your driving.
- Learn more about the relationships between good health practices and how they can help you drive safely longer. Keep in mind that the slowness that comes with aging can be deterred or overcome by motivation, regular exercise, and practice.
- Take as much control as you can of your health habits and lifestyle, recognizing the obvious connection between command of personal health and ability to drive.
- Understand the value of nutrition, exercise, medical check-ups, and the effects of medications, drugs, and alcohol. Your doctor can give you information about all of these areas and tell you where to get more information.



### **My children, other family members or friends have expressed concern about my driving ability.**

It is difficult to accept criticism, but it can be a valuable source of information about your driving skills.

Listen to criticism, so you can improve your driving skills and avoid collisions. Once you start having collisions, the law can take your license away.

#### **Here are some suggestions for how to listen to criticism and comments and turn them into a positive effect on your driving:**

- Lend an open ear to the comments of those concerned about your driving, and keep an open mind. Be sure that you are not dismissing the value of these comments out of denial.
- Look for clues to overcome the dangers of those comments that you judge as valid. It is possible that a driving refresher course or corrective action, such as treatment for faulty vision, might help.
- Look at your responses to the other questions in this self-evaluation. Be very honest with yourself, so you can locate specific problem areas and correct them. Human beings are never too old to learn new skills.
- Begin to prepare for the day when driving will no longer be possible for you, so you can remain mobile after you stop driving. With adequate planning, a non-driving life does not have to be restrictive.



### **How many traffic tickets, warnings, or “discussions” with law enforcement officers have you had in the past two years?**

Some older drivers are aware of their limits and cope with them. Others, however, overestimate their real capabilities and do not adjust their driving habits. The most common mistakes among older drivers include failure to yield, failure to observe signs and signals, careless crossing of intersections, changing lanes without due regard for others, improper backing, and driving too slowly. Inattention and having too much information to handle at one time seem to be the root of most of these conditions.

#### **There are several positive steps you can take if you have received traffic tickets or warnings:**

- Examine why you got the ticket or warning to determine the true cause. Did you miss a stop sign because you were inattentive or because you simply did not see it? Then act on that information. This booklet contains several specific recommendations for particular problems.
- Use the citation or ticket as a warning sign. Act quickly, since citations relate directly to collisions.
- Enroll in a driver training course where you can brush up on your driving skills and learn new ways to handle the challenges faced by older drivers.



### **How many collisions (major or minor) have you had during the past two years?**

A collision is the best predictor of another collision. One collision is often a signal that others are on the way. Denial of diminishing skills is the older driver's greatest danger. Denial results in a continuation of the most dangerous driving habits and keeps the driver from learning new and better ways to drive. Without correction, dangerous driving habits can lead to tragedy.

#### **If you have been involved in a collision, act at once by taking one or more of the following steps:**

- Remember that your insurance may be cancelled if you are involved in too many collisions, even minor ones.
- Take a refresher course. Even if the collision was not your fault, you will learn valuable defensive driving techniques that will help you anticipate trouble before it happens.
- Ask someone whose judgment you trust to ride with you and tell you when you forget to signal or do something else that is unsafe. It is hard to pay attention to traffic and assess our own skills at the same time. An objective assessment is always enlightening.
- If your collision(s) occurred at night or in bad weather, and you suspect that these factors contributed to the collision, avoid driving at these times.
- Begin to prepare for the day when driving will no longer be possible for you, so you can remain mobile after you stop driving. Be honest with yourself; if you are a danger on the road, take responsibility and either improve your skills or stop driving.







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