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Dementia & Driving

While some people with dementia can keep driving through the early stages of the disease, the condition will eventually cause authorities to revoke the privilege. Driving in the advanced stages of dementia can lead to catastrophic results, including fatal car accidents.

Many people take driving for granted, recognizing it as a standard part of the day. But what happens when a dementia diagnosis threatens safe driving skills? Unfortunately, dementia will usually lead to the revocation of a patient's driving privileges, forcing them into a difficult transition.

If your loved one has been diagnosed with dementia, it's crucial to recognize and understand the warning signs, what the diagnosis means for their driving privileges, and how to support them through the tumultuous shift.

How Does Dementia Affect Driving?

Dementia is the loss of memory, language, problem-solving, and other cognitive abilities. It doesn't refer to a singular disease but is a broad term encompassing various medical conditions, including Alzheimer's.

Multiple types of dementia are progressive and gradually worsen over time. While individuals may still drive safely in the early stages of dementia, doing so becomes more of a risk as it progresses.

The disease can affect insight and judgment, potentially creating a dangerous driving situation. It can also lead to mood and personality changes, making reactions more pronounced. This may lead to more erratic or aggressive behavior behind the wheel.

Dementia and Driving Laws

Dementia and driving laws vary from state to state. In some states, individuals with dementia must report the diagnosis to the proper officials, such as the state Department of Motor Vehicles or the Department of Transportation, which may result in the loss of the license.

In many states, no explicit laws prevent individuals with dementia from driving. For example, in West Virginia, there are no laws against driving with dementia. However, doctors, law enforcement, and immediate family can report concerns of an unsafe driver to the state's

Department of Motor Vehicles, which will trigger an investigation by the Medical Review Unit. This may result in the loss of driving privileges.

When Should Someone with Dementia or Alzheimer's Stop Driving?

It can be challenging for some people to recognize it is time to stop driving because of safety issues. If your loved one has been diagnosed with dementia or Alzheimer's, you may want to observe their driving skills or watch for signs indicating it's no longer safe to drive.

Signs may include the following:

- Showing signs of unsafe driving
- Health issues that may impair safe driving, including vision, hearing, and movement complications
- Anxiety about driving
- Recommendations from a doctor to modify or cease driving habits
- Spikes in car insurance premiums due to driving issues
- Comments from family, friends, and neighbors about unsafe, erratic, or aggressive driving
- Two or more traffic tickets or warnings within the past two years

What Are Some Signs of Unsafe Driving?

Signs of unsafe driving associated with Alzheimer's or dementia include the following:

- New dents or scrapes on the vehicle
- Multiple near misses or car accidents
- Confusing the brake and gas pedals
- Driving too slowly or speeding
- Poor decisions in traffic, such as abrupt lane changes
- Poor lane control
- Taking excessive amounts of time to complete a simple errand without explanation
- Stops in traffic for no reason
- Lacks good judgment
- Signals incorrectly or not at all
- Increased nervousness or irritation while driving
- Difficulty seeing pedestrians, vehicles, and other objects

Coping With No Longer Driving

For many people, driving translates to independence and freedom. Yet, when that freedom is taken away, the ability to come and go as one pleases is no longer as simple as grabbing the car keys and heading out. Losing this independence can be difficult to grapple with.

Providing an empathetic, understanding ear is crucial if your loved one struggles to cope with the transition. Reflective listening can help you convey support and encouragement to their struggle in a non-confrontational way.

As your loved one navigates the transition, support them by helping them find a safe, creative outlet, such as painting, sculpting, or other projects. Also, help them find alternative forms of transportation. This can alleviate the stark loss of independence by allowing them to do their favorite things.

In this challenging time, it's essential to convey that relinquishing their driving option doesn't automatically smother their independence or mobility. Here are a few ways seniors can maintain these things throughout the transition:

- **Establish routines:** Set routines, including meals, bathing times, and sleep schedules, to promote feelings of familiarity and security.
- **Write schedules:** Knowing scheduled appointments, mealtimes, and activities promotes independence for seniors with dementia, as they know what to expect.
- **Use labels and signs:** Recalling tasks is often tricky, so use labels and signs placed in the living space as reminders.
- **Use alternative transportation:** Not driving doesn't mean being stuck at home. Look for alternative transportation to get safely from Point A to Point B.
- **Remain social:** Social activities offer a sense of meaning and purpose. Pick activities that match their preferences and ability levels.

How to Talk to a Person About Quitting Driving

No longer driving is often a sensitive topic. When broaching this conversation, it's important to be prepared to avoid stressful confrontations. Here are a few tips on how to talk to a person about retiring from driving:

- **Plan ahead:** This isn't always an option, but if possible, discuss the topic with the person before it becomes an issue.
- **Initiate the conversation:** Express your concerns, focus on the positives, and offer alternative options.
- **Acknowledge their feelings:** Remain open and empathetic about their feelings regarding this loss, as this can feel like losing their independence.
- **Remain supportive:** Appeal to their sense of responsibility surrounding safety while reaffirming your unwavering love and support.
- **Seek third-party assistance:** Sometimes, it's best to seek help from an objective third party or their physician.
- **Remain firm:** If the conversation doesn't go smoothly, remain firm, but be patient. This is a difficult transition and can be overwhelming to face.
- **Offer gentle reminders:** The initial conversation about driving may be the first of many, so be patient and offer gentle reminders as the conversation reappears.

Other Transportation Options for People With Alzheimer's and Dementia

Losing the ability to drive doesn't mean people with Alzheimer's or dementia must be confined to their homes. Instead, consider seeking alternative transportation they can use to travel on their own safely.

Check local services such as free or low-cost buses, taxis, and carpools. Your local Area Agency on Aging can help you search for nearby options. Other resources, including the online Eldercare Locator and Rides in Sight, help determine transportation options for older adults.

Additionally, check with local churches and community groups, as they may have volunteers who drive older individuals to various locations. Family and friends are another excellent option.

Resources and Tips for Family Members and Caregivers

While the transition can be grueling for an individual with dementia, it can also be a challenging switch for family members and caregivers as you adjust to better help them.

Here are a few helpful resources:

- NIA Alzheimer's and Related Dementias Education and Referral Center
- Alzheimer's Association
- Eldercare Locator
- Area Agency on Aging
- Our experienced team of attorneys at Warner Law Offices is familiar with the ins and outs of these cases and can help you navigate the complexities of the legal system to secure the best results.

What to Do If You Are Unable to Persuade Them Not to Drive

If you are unable to persuade the person not to drive, use the following methods as a last resort:

- Take away or hide the car keys
- Replace the car keys with a set that can't start the car
- Disable the car
- Consider selling the car
- Park the car out of sight