

Driving Safety in Dementia: How to Handle the Conversation

Losing the ability to drive is one of the most difficult transitions for many older adults, especially those living with dementia. Driving represents independence, freedom, and identity. As cognitive changes progress, driving may become unsafe. Having thoughtful, respectful conversations early can help make this transition smoother and safer for everyone involved.

Why Driving Becomes Unsafe

- Slower reaction time
- Difficulty with attention and focus
- Problems with judgment and decision-making
- Getting lost, even in familiar areas
- Difficulty following traffic rules or signals
- Visual-spatial problems affecting navigation

Warning Signs Caregivers May Notice

- Getting lost while driving
- Near-misses or minor accidents
- Confusing the gas and brake pedals
- Difficulty staying in the correct lane
- Increased anxiety while driving
- Receiving tickets or complaints from others

When to Start the Conversation

- Early in the course of cognitive decline
- After safety concerns or near-miss events
- When a healthcare provider raises concerns
- Before a crisis or accident occurs

How to Approach the Conversation

Be Respectful and Empathetic

- Acknowledge that this is a difficult change
- Recognize the importance of driving to the person
- Use a calm, supportive tone

Focus on Safety

- Emphasize concern for their safety and the safety of others
- Frame the conversation around care, not control

Use Specific Examples

- Mention recent driving concerns in a non-judgmental way
- Avoid general or vague statements

Involve Healthcare Providers

- A doctor's recommendation can carry more weight
- Some families find it helpful for the provider to lead the discussion

Offer Alternatives

- Arrange transportation from family or friends
- Explore community transportation services
- Use ride-sharing services when appropriate
- Plan regular outings to maintain independence

If the Person Resists

- Avoid arguing or escalating conflict
- Revisit the conversation at another time
- Limit access to car keys if safety is a concern
- Consider professional driving evaluations
- In some cases, involve licensing authorities if necessary

Tips for Caregivers

- Plan ahead before driving becomes unsafe
- Be consistent with messaging from all family members
- Prioritize safety over independence when necessary
- Provide emotional support during the transition
- Recognize this is a loss and allow time for adjustment

National Organizations & Resources

✓ Alzheimer's Association

☎ 800-272-3900 | 🌐 alz.org

✓ National Institute on Aging

🌐 nia.nih.gov

✓ AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

🌐 aaafoundation.org

✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Driving safety is a critical issue in dementia care.
- Early, compassionate conversations can prevent crises.
- Supporting alternative transportation helps preserve independence and quality of life.