

Driving

This help sheet describes how dementia can affect someone's driving skills. It suggests ways to support a driver who has been diagnosed with dementia.

Driving is a highly complex task that involves interaction between the brain, eyes and muscles.

During the early stages of dementia, many people remain safe and competent drivers.

However, as dementia progresses, it can affect memory, reactions, perception and abilities. There will come a time when someone living with dementia will need to stop driving.

Ways in which dementia can affect someone's driving ability include:

- being able to find their way around
- remembering which way to turn
- judging the distance from other cars and objects
- judging the speed of other cars
- reaction time
- hand-eye coordination.

Licensing requirements

The law requires the person with dementia to tell their licensing authority about their diagnosis. They are also required to tell their vehicle insurer.

In some cases, the person's doctor may decide they have a duty of care to tell the licensing authority on their patient's behalf.

If the person with dementia wants to continue driving, they will need a medical review. In some states and territories, this involves a driving test with an occupational therapist.

If a person with dementia continues to drive and they have not notified their licensing authority, or if they continue to drive after their licence has been cancelled or suspended, there can be serious consequences. If the driver is in an accident, they could be charged with driving offences or be sued. In addition, their insurance company may not provide cover.

Signs that dementia may be affecting a person's driving

Warning signs to consider:

- **Vision** Not being able to see straight ahead and to both sides.
- **Hearing** Being unable to hear approaching cars, car horns and sirens.
- **Awareness** Not being able to notice and understand what is happening around them.
- **Staying in the correct lane** Changing lanes unsafely or driving on the wrong side of the road.
- **Traffic lights** Being unable to stop (or go) at traffic lights at the right time.
- **Directions** Difficulty reading a map or using a navigation device. Confusing left and right. Getting lost or taking a long time on familiar trips.
- **Making poor choices** Being unable to make decisions quickly and well when driving.
- **Mood changes** Experiencing mood changes when driving, such as feeling anxious, angry or upset.
- **Braking** Braking or accelerating at the wrong time.
- **Car damage** Finding new dents and scratches on the person's car.

Concerns about driving skills

If you have concerns about someone's ability to drive, you could try:

- Speaking with the person.
- Speaking with their doctor.
- Contacting the relevant licensing authority to discuss your concerns. They may contact the driver and advise that medical and driving tests are needed.

Try to avoid hiding their licence or car keys, disabling their car or taking the car away.

Starting conversations about driving

Consider what driving means to the person. Owning a car and driving can mean more than just mobility. They can be signs of status, a hobby or essential to the person's work.

Some suggestions for when and how to raise concerns about driving:

- Be respectful and try to understand how the person with dementia is feeling.
- Start discussions as soon as possible after diagnosis.
- Choose a time when everyone is calm.
- Where possible, begin discussions when the person with dementia has had changes in medications or their health status, rather than during or after a driving incident.
- Have short and frequent conversations, rather than one long discussion.
- Talk about the person's strengths and offer other options to driving.
- Acknowledge that giving up driving is hard to do.
- Normalise the situation, noting that at some point, everyone will have to stop driving.
- Talk about the symptoms of dementia and the impacts on driving.

Individual responses

The decision to give up driving is complex. It can be especially challenging for people to find alternatives to driving if they live alone or in a rural or remote area.

A person can have different responses to changes in driving ability.

A person may:

- notice changes in their own driving
- not recognise changes in their driving ability
- forget they are no longer able to drive safely
- feel they are losing their independence or identity
- feel relief that they no longer have the responsibility of driving.

Alternatives to driving

You can support someone to drive less, or give up driving, by finding alternatives for getting around and ways to reduce their need to drive.

Things to try:

- Offer to drive the person to appointments, social gatherings and to do shopping.
- Together, investigate online service options, such as online shopping and banking.
- Encourage the use of public transport, ride sharing or taxis when possible.
- Encourage walking when possible. Navigation technology may be helpful.
- Investigate community transport available in the area. Check with the local council.
- Encourage the use of home delivery services for food, medical prescriptions and the local library.
- Ask family and friends to assist with transport, either by driving the person or by accompanying them on other transport.

Some people find that not driving any more has benefits, such as less stress, reduced costs and enjoyment of the journey.

When people stop driving, they often also stop making social trips, like visiting friends, family, attending functions or participating in hobbies. It is important that social contacts are maintained, so encourage the person living with dementia to continue these trips wherever possible.

Additional reading and resources

- Dementia Australia support
Visit: [**dementia.org.au/support**](https://dementia.org.au/support)
- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: [**dementia.org.au/library**](https://dementia.org.au/library)
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: [**dementia.org.au/education**](https://dementia.org.au/education)

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: [dementia.org.au**](https://dementia.org.au)**