

Keep IT Safe AT HOME ON THE ROAD

Tips on Driving Safely and Preventing Falls for Senior Citizens and their Families

Older Americans and their families worry about highway accidents and falling at home—these are major causes of injury and death among people over 70. But many of these injuries can be prevented. They don't "just happen." Here are a few things you can do to make sure they don't.



Driving Risks

- In 1997 almost 6000 people aged 70 and older died in automobile crashes. Most were riding in passenger cars; about a fifth were pedestrians.
- Older people are more likely to be found at fault in fatal crashes than younger drivers. They receive their share of traffic citations for failure to yield, improper turns, and running stop signs and red lights.
- Even in minor crashes, older people are particularly vulnerable to injuries. Those 70 or older are more than three times as likely to die as a young person who suffers the same kind of injury. Older people are more susceptible to medical complications, and it's much more difficult for them to recover.
- Per mile driven, older drivers have higher fatal crash rates than drivers in every other age group except teenagers.

Facts About Falling

- Injuries are the sixth leading cause of death among people 70 and older, with falls the leading cause of fatal injury.
- Each year 10,000 older Americans die from falls.
- Each year more than 200,000 break a hip, almost always as the result of a fall.
- Only about half of those hospitalized for a broken hip are able to return to their homes.
- Senior citizens are involved in more domestic injuries than any other age group—including toddlers.
- About half of all fatal falls among the elderly occur at home.
- About one-third of everyone 70 and over who lives at home will fall this year.



Buckle Up—Don't Test Your Luck

Using your seat belt may be the single most important thing you can do to prevent car injuries. People who aren't wearing lap/shoulder belts are twice as likely to be seriously hurt in a crash as those who are wearing them.

"But I'm only going a few blocks to the store."

Most older-driver accidents happen within a few miles of where the driver lives. Three-quarters of all fatal accidents take place less than 25 miles from home. Most accidents occur on clear days.

"I never drive very fast."

Even when a car is moving as slowly as 12 miles per hour, someone inside can be killed on impact if not protected by a safety belt. Four out of five accidents occur at less than 40 mph.

"The seatbelt will keep me from being thrown clear to safety"

No, it won't! Someone who is thrown clear in a collision has about 25 times greater risk of being killed than someone who's wearing a seatbelt.

"My shoulder belt is hard to fasten, and it's not comfortable."

Take the time to make sure it's positioned correctly. Get used to wearing it. Those few seconds could save your life. Drivers should insist that their passengers use belts. IN MANY STATES, IT'S THE LAW.

VISION

As we get older, our eyes need more light to see clearly. We need more time to adjust both to darkness and to sudden dazzling light. Depth perception is not as good. Peripheral vision—the ability to see to the side—worsens significantly. This is very important in driving, because almost everything a driver must notice and respond to is first seen peripherally.

Safety Tips On the Road

- Regular eye check-ups and the right glasses are essential. It's also essential to wear your glasses. And to keep them clean. The same goes for your car's glasses—mirrors, headlights, tail lights and windshields, particularly the inside surfaces.
- Remember that you depend on all of your car mirrors to boost your peripheral vision. Keep checking the mirrors when you change lanes or make a turn.
- Install a right side-view mirror if your car doesn't have one.
- Installing an extra-large rear-view mirror is a good way to reduce the "blind spots" that regular mirrors don't cover.
- Avoid driving at dawn and dusk when it's much harder to see objects clearly or to judge distances.

At Home

- Good light is one of the most effective safeguards against falling—especially on stairs, in hallways, and in the kitchen and bathroom. Older people need three times as much light as young people do. Replace bulbs with the brightest wattage the fixture will take, preferably 100 watts.
- Make sure you can see where you're going when you get up at night to go to the bathroom, either with night lights, a flashlight by your bed, or a bed lamp you can reach easily.
- Highlight outside steps with bright white or yellow paint to make them more visible at night. Tuck away lamp or phone cords so you won't trip over

Aging.
Be aware of
normal physical
changes that
result.

them.

FLEXIBILITY & MUSCLE TONE

As we get older, our joints become less flexible and our muscle strength decreases. It's harder to turn our heads and to lift our feet up over objects lying in our path.

SAFETY TIPS

Keeping fit is the best way to prevent injuries—and exercise makes you feel great. Being in shape, whether through aerobics, walking, swimming, dancing, or simple stretching exercises, helps your mobility and balance.

On the Road

- Studies show that older drivers with high fitness levels have better driving skills than those who are out of shape.
- Using a firm cushion will give you better back support. On longer trips, stopping frequently to walk around and stretch will reduce fatigue and stiffness.

At Home

- Move slowly. Don't get up in a hurry. As you're getting out of a chair or bed hold on to a piece of stable furniture.
- Remove hazards that can cause you to trip and fall. These include loose carpets and scatter rugs. Keep carpet edges firmly in place with double-faced adhesive tape. Move throw rugs well out of pathways and secure them. (They're called "throw rugs" for a reason!) Think of removing them altogether.
- Don't ever walk around in stocking feet or just socks. Comfortable non-skid shoes are much safer than slippers.
- Install easy-to-grasp railings on both sides of stairways. In the bathroom, put grab bars next to the toilet and over the tub. Make sure tubs and showers have a rubber mat or non-skid strips.

REACTION TIME

As we get older, it takes longer to process information we take in through our eyes and ears. It becomes harder to make the kind of split-second decisions often required on the road. And it takes longer to act on them. Judging the speed of other vehicles or distances between them is particularly tricky.

Safety Tips

- Stay well back from the car in front of you. You have a better chance to respond to a sudden stop.
- Avoid driving in heavy traffic or during rush hour.
- Left turns, particularly at busy intersections, are tricky because they involve processing information from many cues. Avoid them when you can, even if this means making a series of right turns. If you can't, make sure you signal well in advance.
- Having a passenger to help navigate is a good idea.

MEDICATION & ALCOHOL

As we get older, even routine medications can affect us in potentially dangerous ways. Some of the most common drugs used to treat high blood pressure or arthritis can cause drowsiness or dizziness. Our bodies metabolize alcohol more slowly, so we are less able to tolerate its effects. Even one drink can make a big difference in reaction time.

Safety Tips

- Always ask your physician and pharmacist how the medicine you take may affect your driving and vulnerability to falling.
- When you take more than one drug, always ask whether the combination can produce side effects and for how long.
- Drugs and alcohol don't mix.
- Don't drive at all for at least an hour after you have a drink— even one drink. Better yet, don't drink and drive at all.

ADVANCED SAFETY

On the Road

- Sign up for one of the special driving courses for senior citizens sponsored in communities across the country by such groups as the American Association of Retired Persons or the American Automobile Association. In many states, you may even get a reduction in your insurance rates upon completion.
- Buying a new car? Consider one with airbags and anti-lock brakes.

At Home

- Detailed checklists for preventing injuries in the home should be available through your local library or senior citizens center.
- Home audits, in which a trained professional identifies hazards, are available in some communities. For more information, contact your local government department of aging, department of health or your health maintenance organization.

Emergency and Help Numbers

Rescue Squad _____
Doctor _____
Neighbor _____
Family _____
Landlord _____
Local aging department _____

A public service for the **Association of Trial Lawyers of America** and the **Johns Hopkins Injury Prevention Center**.