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Who is more likely to cause an accident – a 19 year old driver or a 78 year old driver? The answer is the 19 year old driver. Yet two recent accidents caused by using the wrong pedal have brought the issue of older drivers to the local forefront.

I suggest that instead of talking about age and crash rates, we should focus on the heart of the issue – that driving is a key factor in independence for many older adults and giving up the keys has a profound effect on both the older adult and his or her family.

The loss of driving ability is second only to the loss of a spouse or a job for causing stress and unhappiness. Non-drivers have a decreased ability to engage in social activities and to obtain needed health services. Older non-drivers make 15% fewer trips to the doctor, 59% fewer shopping trips and 65% fewer trips for social, family or religious activities.¹

Some older adults decide of their own volition to stop driving or limit their driving. Twenty-five percent of people 75 and older no longer drive.² Studies have found that those who assess their own driving abilities and then decide to limit themselves or fully retire from driving do better at adjusting to independence changes.

Though age alone is not a good predictor of driving safety or ability, aging does bring changes in vision, hearing, depth perception and reflexes. These changes influence our driving ability – especially when combined with medical conditions or medications.

Our advice to older adults is to pay attention to family, friends and your physician if they are expressing concerns about your driving skills. Self-limit when and where you drive, allowing for a gradual adjustment to alternative transportation. If you would like to know more about your driving skills, Lifespan has a brand new service that includes self-assessment and education to reduce the chances that you put yourself or others at risk.

Our advice to family members who are concerned about an older driver is to have a frank discussion with safety, medical and behavioral concerns taking center stage. Drive with the person and note potential problems. Don't scold or harangue – especially in the car. Encourage the driver to take a self-assessment test. If possible enlist support from the driver's friends who will confirm your worries. Be prepared with alternative transportation options.

If the person resists all efforts to limit or stop driving, the DMV will retest individuals when a written request is filed giving specific examples of unsafe driving behavior or

¹ National Household Transportation Survey, US Dept of Transportation, 2001.

² AARP

medical conditions/medications you believe impair ability. A doctor, the police or an eye care provider can also submit a retest request.

The decision stop driving is just one side of the issue. Accessing convenient, cost-effective transportation is a problem for non-driving older adults. Relying on family members can feel burdensome, and current public transportation services are unable to provide optimal mobility because of cost, regulations and geographic location. For profit transportation services are available, but they are expensive.

Volunteers can help fill the transportation gap. Lifespan launched the Give-a-Lift a volunteer driver recruitment campaign in 2003. As a result, more than 250 volunteers have provided more than 11,000 rides for non-driving older adults through community organizations like FISH, STAR and Elderberry Express. More volunteer drivers are always needed.

Safe driving is a significant personal and community responsibility. If physical or cognitive factors impede ability – at any age – we owe it to ourselves to assess our road safety. Likewise, if you are concerned about a person’s driving ability, you owe it to that person and to the community to speak up, and if necessary, take action.

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