

Tips from Lighthouse International for Older Drivers with Vision Problems

Everyone experiences some normal vision changes due to aging. They may have more difficulty focusing on near tasks like reading or difficulty distinguishing colors and contrast; they may need more light. But as Americans live longer, increasing numbers of people are affected by more severe vision problems due to conditions such as macular degeneration and glaucoma.

The ability to drive a car and get around independently is essential for millions of people. While driving safely is a key concern for everyone, changes in the aging eye make it especially relevant for older adults.

If you are 60 years of age or over, you are driving with only about one-third of the light you had when you were 20 years old! This is due to changes within the eye (such as yellowing of the lens and decreasing pupil size) that most people haven't even realized have occurred. Also, as an older driver, you cannot process and respond to visual information as quickly and efficiently as you could when you were younger.

The following tips can make the driving experience much safer for the older driver:

- You should always have regular check-ups to maintain eye health and to ensure that your ability to drive safely is not compromised by undetected vision loss.
- Be aware that driving under the influence of some medications can dramatically diminish your ability to react to unexpected road hazards. Ask your doctor about the side effects of any medications you're taking.
- Nighttime driving, which typically involves exposure to bright, fleeting glare, presents a particular challenge to older drivers. With this in mind, use extra caution in your decision to get behind a wheel at night.
- To minimize glare exposure when driving at night, do not look directly at the headlights of oncoming vehicles. Instead, direct your gaze down the road and toward the right side of your lane.
- Older drivers require more time to adjust to sudden changes in light level, such as when one enters a darkened tunnel from the bright afternoon sunlight. You can partially solve this problem with a pair of "flip-up/down sunglasses." View through the sunglasses for a few minutes while approaching a tunnel. Then flip them up and out of the way on entering the tunnel. You can also use "wrap-around" sunglasses that fit over the top of

your prescription eyeglasses, but can be removed easily upon entering a tunnel or other light-altering situation.

- Cataracts can interfere seriously with driving performance, even though they only may produce a small decline in one's ability to read a chart in the doctor's office. If you're developing cataracts, check with your eye doctor about whether or not it's time to have them removed.
- Plan your travel to minimize the impact of any visual limitations. When possible, drive in familiar locations, and avoid driving at night, in bad weather and during busy rush hours.
- Consider speaking to an eye care specialist, friend or family member about any concerns you may have related to driving.
- Familiarize yourself with the vision requirements for holding a driver's license where you live; the regulations vary greatly from state to state.
- If you're worried that a family member can no longer see well enough to drive, your first step should be to discuss the issue with the driver. In many instances, older drivers change their driving behaviors to compensate for vision changes— you may be relieved to learn that your family member is aware of the problem and taking steps to ensure his or her safety. If your relative doesn't agree that there's a problem, encourage a discussion with an eye doctor and, if it's acceptable, go along to the appointment yourself. Often, when both family members and a doctor express concern, a patient will heed the warning.

These tips are based on an established body of research, and on original research conducted by the Arlene R. Gordon Research Institute of Lighthouse International (updated 2003).