

## Series: Driving and Progressive Dementia

### Session 2: Safe Driving and Mild Cognitive Impairment

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#### ***Purpose of Series: Driving and Progressive Dementia***

*The purpose of the series of educational sessions called **Driving and Progressive Dementia** is to describe briefly issues of driving safety especially as driver skills change in people who have declines in memory and thinking functions. [Note: In these educational sessions "Driving" refers to driving any motor vehicle or any all-terrain vehicle, for example a car, a truck, a dune buggy, a van, an SUV, a trailer, a motorcycle, a golf cart, a lawn mower, a motor boat or motorized water bikes, a motorized scooter, a snowmobile... in other words any kind of moving vehicle with a motor.]*

*There are three sessions. **Session One: Safe Driving** focuses on the importance of the driver who may be undergoing general health changes and ways to stay safe when operating a motor vehicle. **Session Two: Safe Driving and Mild Cognitive Impairment** focuses on the driving issues related to the person who is having some mild short-term memory problems and perhaps some very early signs of occasional difficulty in other thinking functions, but appears to be functioning normally on a daily basis. **Session Three: Safe Driving and Alzheimer's Disease or a Related Dementia (Memory Disorder)** focuses on the driving issues related to the person who is dealing with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or a related progressive memory disorder (dementia). **This second session is on Safe Driving and Mild Cognitive Impairment.***

### Session 2: Safe Driving and Mild Cognitive Impairment

Changes in the brain that affect memory, thinking skills, and the control of body actions eventually affect driving ability. Early brain cell changes may lead to a very small amount of decline in short-term memory, some minor difficulty in keeping up with managing complex events such as overseeing a business or organizing a class or family reunion. Occasionally the person may experience some delay when trying to recall an exact name or word. Despite these mild

difficulties, driving skills may remain strong. Driver skills are most likely strong if there are no changes in driver ability, no recent accidents, no difficulties parking the car, no problems handling surprise moves by other drivers, and no near misses, scrapes or fender-benders.

However, some early brain cell changes that lead to a decline in body movement, such as coordinated hand movements (for example, using a tool to do a home repair such as fixing a door knob, using a knife and fork when eating or buttoning a jacket), may affect driving skills. The decline in hand skills may result in less ability to manage driving a motor vehicle, whether it is a car, truck, motor boat, or simple lawn mower. Driving may be less safe, not only for the passengers with the struggling driver but also for people in other cars on the road. Anyone who has difficulty moving one or both hands or arms should undergo a medical exam. If this difficulty is the beginning of a progressive disorder, a regular medical check-up is essential to make sure that driving safety is not reduced.

**Are you a safe driver? Yes or No: A “yes” to any of the following questions should lead to a talk with your family and your doctor to see if a health change may mean you are at a higher risk as a driver.**

|     | <b>Warning Signs</b>   | <b>Yes</b> | <b>No</b> |
|-----|--|------------|-----------|
| 1.  | Have you noticed any change in your driving skills in the past few months or within the past year?   |            |           |
| 2.  | In the past six months has anyone commented about your unsafe driving?   |            |           |
| 3.  | Are you less sure of your overall driving skill?   |            |           |
| 4.  | This past year did you, while driving, ever forget where you were going?   |            |           |
| 5.  | In the past year have you become lost while driving?   |            |           |
| 6.  | Do other drivers honk at you or show signs of being angry at you?  |            |           |
| 7.  | This past year, has anyone riding in the car with you suddenly said, “Watch out!” or “Be careful of that driver...” or “Don’t hit that...”?            |            |           |
| 8.  | In the past year has anyone refused to ride with you as the driver?  |            |           |
| 9.  | In the past year has anyone asked you to stop driving?   |            |           |
| 10. | In the past year have you had any car accidents?   |            |           |
| 11. | In the past year have you almost had a car accident (any close calls)?   |            |           |
| 12. | In the past six months, have you had any slight scrapes or fender-benders with other cars in parking lots?   |            |           |
| 13. | In the past six months while driving, have you scraped other objects in the garage or bushes, fence, trees along your driveway? How about the mailbox? |            |           |
| 14. | In the past year, have you received any traffic warnings or tickets for speeding, going too slow, turning improperly, not stopping, etc.               |            |           |

|     |   |  |  |
|-----|---|--|--|
| 15. | Have you missed seeing a traffic sign or red light?   |  |  |
| 16. | Are you having problems with parking: scraping curbs, bumping other cars, not able to fit in between the lines or into the space? |  |  |
| 17. | In the past year have you confused the gas pedal and brake pedal?   |  |  |
| 18. | In the past year have you been more unsure about where to turn or exit?   |  |  |
| 19. | Do you need a "copilot" to drive?   |  |  |

## **The Driver with Mild Cognitive Impairment**

People who have only a short-term memory loss are often diagnosed as having a Mild Cognitive Impairment. Sometimes people with Mild Cognitive Impairment, often called MCI, will also have very mild, occasional difficulty recalling specific names during conversations. They may have other occasional mild thinking difficulties such as keeping up with many topics that come up when many people talk at a meeting. Or, they may have trouble managing complicated projects, such as leading the annual fund raiser for their religious community. Generally speaking, however, they manage their paid job, home duties and relationships just fine.

With a healthy lifestyle many of these people will not experience any further brain cell decline and will continue to be skilled, safe drivers. Others, despite their best and healthiest efforts, seem to convert over time to slow, progressive declines in memory and other thinking functions.

### **Short-term Memory and Driving**

Short-term memory and thinking functions are important for safe driving:

**If there is a mild decline in short-term memory:** A person must be able to remember information that was just heard or seen to be a safe driver. For example, remembering a sign or lit message board by the roadside about upcoming road repair or road hazards from weather changes is important in order to drive more cautiously before approaching the hazardous area. For example, road surfaces on a bridge become icy and increase the hazards of skidding before the temperature drops to freezing; 37 degrees Fahrenheit is considered as the point of such danger.

**Mild decline in naming:** A person must be able to read quickly and to understand language such as names of places and signs with directions while driving along at the speed limit.

### **Early Medical Exam is Important**

Often an early medical evaluation when the symptoms such as problems with memory first appear will lead to help. Recommendations may improve function and slow the rate of decline that is occurring. At the point of beginning decline, the person with Mild Cognitive Impairment probably still is fully safe as a driver of motor vehicles.

To determine if decline is ongoing in the person with Mild Cognitive Impairment, a medical check-up every three to six months with the physician offers a way to monitor changes. If medical findings suggest a decline in driver skills, then the physician may recommend limits on driving. In some cases the physician may decide that a comprehensive driver evaluation should occur before the person continues to drive.

If there are any reports from the person or the family (or significant other) that any of the risks in the above table (Are you a safe driver? Yes or No) have occurred, then a comprehensive driver evaluation should occur before the person continues driving. Sometimes as a result of such testing, a driver refresher course or training with a driver safety specialist may update the driver's skills. A driver safety specialist may suggest adding features such as a wider rear-view mirror or larger side-view mirrors to the vehicle to increase the visual field of the driver.

A comprehensive (full) driver evaluation is more extensive than the regular driver test of the Department of Motor Vehicles and Highway Safety. The comprehensive driver evaluation test involves different vision tests, tests of memory and cognitive functions as well as an on-the-road test (some places use a virtual test, an indoor set-up that was designed to imitate on-the-road driving situations).

A driver safety specialist who is certified in comprehensive driver evaluation is trained in assessment and may offer some "driver rehab". Some of these specialists are occupational therapists; others have different training. Further information is available in the next table of resources.

## National Resources

1. **ACTION (Accessible Community Transportation in Our Nation; an Easter Seals project) (800)659-6428**  
[www.projectaction.org](http://www.projectaction.org)
2. **AlzOnline (866)260-2466** [www.AlzOnline.net](http://www.AlzOnline.net)
3. **Alzheimer's Association (800)272-3900** [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)
4. **American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)**  
[www.aota.org/olderdriver](http://www.aota.org/olderdriver)
5. **ElderLocator (800)677-1116** [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov)

## Florida Resources: Florida Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA)

1. **Florida Elder Helpline (800) 963-5337**
2. **Florida DOEA (850) 414-2000**

This ends **Session 2: *Safe Driving and Mild Cognitive Impairment.***

Further information about driving occurs in **Session 1: *Safe Driving*** and in **Session 3: *Safe Driving and Alzheimer's Disease or a Related Dementia (Memory Disorder).***

## Some Additional Resources

Alternative transportation: <http://www.eldercare.gov>

Association of Driver Rehabilitation Specialists: <http://www.aded.net>

**CarFit:** [www.eldersafety.org/latest/roadmap-to-driving-wellness-and-car-fit-two-exciting-new-programs.html](http://www.eldersafety.org/latest/roadmap-to-driving-wellness-and-car-fit-two-exciting-new-programs.html)

Driver refresher courses: <http://www.aarp.org/drive>; [www.aaapublicaffairs.com](http://www.aaapublicaffairs.com)

DriveWell: <http://www.asaging.org/drivewell>

**DriveAble** (a Canadian program): <http://www.driveable.com>

**Driving & Dementia Toolkit** (published in Journal of the American Geriatric Society):  
<http://rgapottawa.com/dementia/english/default.asp>

**Florida At-Risk Driver Council, Florida Senior Safety Resource Center.** The Effects of Aging on Driving Ability. (February 2004).  
<http://www.hsmv.state.fl.us/ddl/atriskdriver.pdf> or [www.fssrc.php.ufl.edu](http://www.fssrc.php.ufl.edu)

**GrandDriver** information & references: <http://www.granddriver.info/>

**Independence Drive:** <http://driving.php.ufl.edu/index.php> (NODRTC website);  
<http://www.php.ufl.edu/ot/> (OT website); <http://www.IndependenceDrive.php.ufl.edu>

**Older driver facts:** <http://www.seniordrivers.org>; [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov); [www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov)

### Free Booklets

*At the Crossroads: A Guide to Alzheimer's Disease, Dementia & Driving.* (2003).  
The Hartford. [www.thehartford.com/alzheimers](http://www.thehartford.com/alzheimers); Also: *We need to talk...*

Age Page. *Age Page on Older Drivers.* (Free Brochure). 1-800-222-2225  
[www.nia.nih.gov/health/agepages/drivers.htm](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/agepages/drivers.htm).

*Florida Transportation. Lifetime Choices.* FL. Dept. of Highway Safety & Motor Vehicles & FL Dept. of Elder Affairs. [www.hsmv.state.fl.us](http://www.hsmv.state.fl.us) or phone (850)487-0867

*Physician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers* (booklet).(9/03)  
(AA34:02-520:15M7/03) (DOT HS 809 647) (ISBN:1-57947-558-2)  
1. American Medical Association at [www.ama.org](http://www.ama.org) or telephone (313) 464-4179.  
2. U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration at [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov) or telephone (888) 327-4236.

*Driving When You are Taking Medications.* (Free Brochure DOT HS 809 777)  
8/04  
National Highway Traffic Safety, U.S. Dept. of Transportation. DOT Auto Safety  
Hotline: 1-888-327-4236. [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov))

*Safe Driving for Older Adults.* (Free Brochure DOT HS 809 493)  
National Highway Traffic Safety, U.S. Dept. of Transportation. DOT Auto Safety  
Hotline: 1-888-327-4236. [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)