



DRIVING and the ALZHEIMER'S PATIENT

Dementia patients often demonstrate deficiencies in judgment and performance behind the wheel. Caregivers should look for these signs which might indicate that the AD person should no longer drive:

- Forgetting how to get to familiar places.
- Not following traffic signs.
- Showing poor judgment of distance (turns too wide or too tight, running over curbs).
- Making poor decisions in traffic (not yielding right-of-way, demonstrating slow reactions to emergencies).
- Driving at speeds not right for conditions.
- Becoming easily confused or angry while driving.

Continued driving by the affected person can pose dangers to himself as well as to others on the road. Families are often reluctant to stop the dementia person from driving because: a) he will resist; b) self-esteem will suffer from the loss of mobility and independence; c) the spouse depends on that person to do the driving.

Sometimes, a person with ADRD can still drive because their travels follow a routine, such as driving to work every day or to the same grocery store, bank, etc. When something unexpected happens, however, such as a construction detour or a snowstorm, the dementia person's inability to cope may become evident. Many people with AD do not give up driving until they are involved in accidents.

The responsibility for curtailing the dementia person's driving usually falls to the caregiver. It's a difficult time for everyone: The dementia person may become angry; the caregiver may be saddened and guilty by the fact that yet another thing has been taken away from their loved one.

Here are some suggestions if you meet resistance when "taking away the keys":

- Have the family physician write to tell the patient he/she can no longer drive. Having a letter allows the family to refer to it as often as necessary.
- Disable the car by removing the distributor cap or some other part.
- Move the car to another location ("The car is in the shop").

(Note: California has instituted a law that requires physicians to report dementia cases to the department of motor vehicles, so that dementia patients can be tested every year. In Alaska, the DMV Chief of Drivers Services (Juneau) will consider canceling a dementia person's driver's license if there is written testimony from his or her physician who cites the specific problem and/or danger to the public. Police, responding to the scene of an accident, may also report cases of confused, disoriented or irrational drivers, which in turn may be investigated by the DMV.)