

Driving and Dementia

Individuals with progressive dementias often demonstrate challenges in judgment and performance behind the wheel.

Caregivers should look for these signs which might indicate a person with dementia should no longer drive or should be evaluated by a professional:

- Forgetting how to get to familiar places
- Incorrect signaling
- Moving into the wrong lane
- Confusion at exits or intersections
- Stopping in traffic for no reason
- Showing poor judgment of distance (turns too wide or too tight, running over curbs).
- Not yielding right-of-way
- Slow reaction time
- Driving at speeds not right for conditions
- Becoming easily confused or angry while driving

Continued driving once these warning signs exist can pose dangers to the individual as well as to others on the road. Families are often reluctant to stop the person with progressive dementia from driving for a variety of reasons such as:

- The person with progressive dementia will resist and get upset
- Fear that the person with progressive dementia will experience a decrease in self-esteem from the changes in mobility and independence.
- The partner depends on the person with progressive dementia to do the driving (lack of a backup plan).

Sometimes, a person with progressive dementia can still drive because their travels follow a routine, such as driving to work every day or to the same grocery store, bank, etc. However, when something unexpected happens, such as construction, a detour, or extreme weather, the person's inability to cope may become evident. Many people with progressive dementia do not give up driving until they are involved in an accident. This "dilemma" needs to be continuously monitored.

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The responsibility for dealing with driving issues usually falls to the caregiver. It's a difficult time for everyone. The person with progressive dementia may become angry. The caregiver may be saddened or feel 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":

- If possible have a discussion with your loved one before driving becomes problematic to get their agreement when or if they can no longer drive safely.
- Move the car to another location out of sight. You can say the car is in the shop.
- Have the family physician write a letter or "prescription" stating the individual 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, or file down the individual's car key so it will no longer work.
- Avoid telling someone with a progressive dementia that "you can't drive anymore." This is too abstract. Better to say "it's not safe;" or "the doctor said ..."
- In Anchorage, contact Providence Outpatient & Rehabilitation at: 907-212-6300 to schedule a driving assessment.

*** Note:** In Alaska, the DMV will consider canceling a person's driver's license if there is written testimony from a physician or member of the general public stating the specific problem and/or danger to the public. The testimony is kept confidential. Examinations may be required before a determination is made. 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.