

Driving

CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH DEMENTIA

Families and carers may be worried about a person with dementia who continues to drive. This Help Sheet describes the effects that dementia may have on driving skills and suggests ways to help a driver who has been diagnosed with dementia.

A diagnosis of dementia does not always mean that a person is immediately incapable of driving. However, dementia produces a progressive and irreversible loss of mental functioning. Dementia can cause loss of memory, limited concentration and sight problems. This of course affects a person's judgement and ability to drive safely. When their ability is affected, the person with dementia will be a risk, not only to themselves, but also to others through their driving.

In all States and Territories, except Western Australia, drivers have an obligation to tell their licensing authority of any medical condition that might affect their ability to drive safely. Diabetes, some heart conditions and dementia are all medical conditions that need to be disclosed because they may affect a person's driving ability.

The licensing authority will generally advise the driver to see a doctor who will assess whether it is safe to keep driving for a period of time. If the doctor determines that dementia is affecting the person's ability to drive, then the licensing authority in most States and Territories can place conditions on their licence. These conditions might be that they can only drive close to home, or at certain times or below 100km/h. Regular medical and driving tests might be required as the dementia will cause their ability to decline over time.

Individual responses

The aim of caring for someone with dementia is to support their maximum level of independence. For people living alone or in remote areas of the country it can be especially difficult to manage without driving. No longer being able to drive a car can be a threat to the independence of many people. For someone in the early stages of dementia having to give up

driving may seem like giving up altogether and losing control.

While some people will recognise their declining ability, others may not, or may simply forget that they can no longer drive. For others it will be a relief to no longer have the responsibility of driving.

Warning signs that dementia may be affecting a person's driving

To help decide whether a person still has the ability to drive safely consider the following warning signs:

- **Vision.** Can they see things coming straight at them or from the sides?
- **Hearing.** Can they hear the sound of approaching cars, car horns and sirens?
- **Reaction time.** Can they turn, stop or speed up their car quickly?
- **Problem solving.** Do they become upset and confused when more than one thing happens at the same time?



Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**

- **Coordination.** Have they become clumsy and started to walk differently because their coordination is affected?
- **Alertness.** Are they aware and understand what is happening around them?
- Can they tell the difference between left and right?
- Do they become confused on familiar routes?
- Do they understand the difference between Stop and Go lights?
- Are they able to stay in the correct lane?
- Can they read a road map and follow detour routes?
- Has their mood changed when driving? Some previously calm drivers may become angry or aggressive

Changes in driving behaviour may have been occurring for some time without being noticed.

If you have concerns about a person's ability to drive, try speaking to them or their doctor. You can also contact the Driver Licensing Authority in your State or Territory to discuss your concerns. The Driver Licensing Authority may contact the driver and advise that a medical and driving test is necessary.

What to try if the person has been advised not to drive

Talk about the problems openly with the driver concerned. Look for ways to help them with the decision to stop driving

- The person may not understand why they can't drive. It may help to empathise with the feelings of loss but respond with the same short message ie the doctor believes it is safer not to drive
- It may be best to avoid rational discussion or argument about the issue
- A letter from the doctor or licensing authority may help the person accept the decision
- Try to support past routines with new forms of transport
- Contact local councils about their transport services ie community buses and transport for appointments are sometimes available
- For older drivers the road transport and traffic authority in each State and Territory

has a number of publications about driving. These are usually available free of charge

- Arrange outings which do not require the car to be driven by the person with dementia
- Suggest good reasons for using public transport, or having someone else drive, such as being less stressful, able to enjoy scenery, and saving on the cost of running a car

If all else fails hide the keys or immobilise the car.

Support for families and carers

Dealing with this issue can be extremely difficult for some people with dementia and their families and carers. It may require sensitive handling. If you would like further assistance or to speak to someone personally about your particular situation contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

Commonwealth Carelink Centres around Australia provide information about the range of community care programs and services (including transport) available to help people stay in their own homes. Call **1800 052 222** or visit **www.commcarelink.health.gov.au**

Further Information

In 2003, Austroads released new medical standards for drivers of private and commercial vehicles. The standards are contained in the document *Assessing Fitness to Drive*, which is available at **www.austroads.com.au** and **www.alzheimers.org.au**

Alzheimer's Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

The National Dementia Behaviour Advisory Service (NDBAS) is a national telephone advisory service for families, carers and respite staff who are concerned about the behaviours of people with dementia. The service provides confidential, comprehensive advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can be contacted on **1300 366 448**.

For further information or to view more Help Sheets visit our website at **www.alzheimers.org.au**