Driving is a critical issue for seniors. Not only are many older drivers at a higher risk for road accidents, people over 65 are more likely to be seriously hurt in a vehicle accident. Many caregivers are concerned about their older loved one taking the wheel but have a difficult time approaching this sensitive subject.

Many seniors continue to be good, safe drivers as they age, but there are normal changes that can affect driving skills. As joints get stiff, muscles weaken and reflexes are slowed it is more difficult to turn your head to look back, steer quickly or safely hit the breaks. Eyesight and vision changes also can affect safe driving. Medical conditions such as Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, arthritis and strokes may also affect driving as well as the medications taken to combat these and other illnesses.

Being able to drive is more than just getting where you want to go. It is a symbol of freedom, independence and self-sufficiency. But there may be a time when driving is no longer safe. How does one go about taking this privilege away from the person they love?

It is important to know the warning signs of unsafe driving. (Look at the driving behaviors over a period of time, not just one trip.)

- Abrupt lane changes, braking or accelerating
- Trouble navigating turns
- Drifts into other lanes
- Confusion at exits
- Near misses
- Confusing brake and gas pedals
- Delayed responses to unexpected situations
- Failure to observe traffic signs
- Increased agitation or irritation while driving
- Driving at inappropriate speeds
- Fails to pay attention to signs, signals or pedestrians

If you notice any of these warning signs it is time to initiate change. Start by scheduling a driving evaluation through the local DMV and/or refresher driving lessons. Try finding ways to reduce the amount of driving by ordering things through the mail, using public transportation or finding others to give rides when able. Having friends and family members stop by on a regular basis to offer help with errands, etc. is another good approach.

When it is clear that driving is no longer safe at all, start slowly and respectfully in persuading the person to give up his/her keys. Talk about safety – theirs and others on the road. Talk about options for getting around (public transportation, friends, family, taxi) - hopefully some of these are already in place. Emphasize the cost savings associated with giving up a car: gas, insurance, repairs, fees, etc. The money saved can be used to pay for taxis or other transportation services. Use the confirmation of family,
friends and physician to back up your concern for the person’s safety. Plan to visit the person weekly at a designated time to assist with things like shopping and appointments. Also be sure that transportation is available to meet their social needs as well.

If the person refuses to quit driving, it may be necessary to take away the car keys, disable the car or remove it from their residence. A physician can write a prescription stating “no driving” and/or a local police officer could explain the importance of safe driving and the legal implications of unsafe driving. Do not jeopardize the safety of your loved one or others by ignoring the issue of unsafe driving.

Additional resources on this subject are available through AARP, the Alzheimer’s Association and your Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) of Winnebago County. Call toll free at 877-886-2372, e-mail at adrc@co.winnebago.wi.us or stop by at 220 Washington Ave in Oshkosh or 211 N. Commercial Street in Neenah.

Information taken from the National Institute on Aging and The Hartford

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