

Driving

THIS FACT SHEET discusses specific problems that can affect driving, how to get a driving assessment and suggests ways of handling a family member who is no longer safe to drive.

Not all medical conditions affect driving performance in the same way and not all individuals with the same condition will be affected in the same manner. A person's fitness to drive depends on their cognitive (thinking and perceptual) and physical abilities, and their ability to cope with unusual and emergency situations. Some people are able to compensate for changes in their abilities while others may not. The effects of acquired brain injury (ABI) can sometimes be subtle and difficult to detect and may also creep up over time, affecting a person's ability to drive safely.

Conditions that Affect Driving

Physical changes: A person with ABI may experience physical weakness or poor coordination that comes and goes unpredictably, for example, affecting their control of the car.

Cognitive changes: These are changes in a person's thinking or perceptual abilities. For example, difficulties with perception may cause problems judging gaps in traffic. Changes in vision and attention may leave them unable to see potential hazards in their peripheral vision.

They may have slowed response times, trouble concentrating or experience confusion, all of which are dangerous when driving.

If there are doubts about your family member's ability to drive, you need to encourage them to discuss this with a doctor or occupational therapist.

Stroke: After stroke or serious head injuries, doctors normally recommend that a person wait at least three months before driving again. The

decision about if and when to return to driving should be made in consultation with a doctor and where appropriate, a driving assessor.

Driving assessment and other specialist referrals: A detailed assessment by a specialist occupational therapist driving assessor can detect subtle problems that affect driving ability. It may also be necessary to refer the family member to another specialist – to have their vision tested, for example.

The Carer's Dilemma

Having a driver's licence gives a person independence. Being forced to give up this independence can have a big impact on the person's self esteem and well being. This is a sensitive issue that carers of people with ABI need to handle carefully.

It is important to discuss your safety concerns with your family member in a sensitive but straightforward way. Some people will understand the problem clearly, others may deny there is a problem, especially if their condition has deteriorated slowly and they do not realise they are no longer safe to drive.

Specialists can help: Some people will accept advice more readily from their doctor than a family member. You could ask your doctor to tackle the subject with your family member or see the doctor together and bring up the subject yourself. You or the doctor or an occupational therapist might suggest that the person has a driving assessment. When the person decides to have an assessment themselves, it helps them to feel that the decision remains in their control.

If this is not possible however, it may be necessary to write directly to VicRoads, or ask your doctor to do so.

Involving VicRoads

A doctor, health professional, friend or relative can write to VicRoads to express their concern about a person's driving skills that have deteriorated as a result of a medical condition. This letter is dealt with by VicRoads' Medical Review Section, which writes to the person to outline its concerns, and asks them to obtain a medical assessment from their doctor.

Depending on the doctor's report, VicRoads may then require a Review Driving Test or an Occupational Therapy Driver Assessment by an occupational therapist (it provides a list of approved occupational therapists).

Occupational Therapy Driver Assessment: This involves an off-road assessment that looks at the driver's medical and driving history, their physical, sensory and cognitive abilities and their knowledge of road law. This may be followed by an on-road assessment in a dual-control car.

The Medical Review Section then considers the reports from the doctor and occupational therapist. In its final decision, it may allow your family member to retain a full licence with annual medical reviews. Or it may grant a conditional licence that specifies modifications to the car or that allows daylight driving only. Or it may suspend or cancel the licence but agree to review these terms if their condition improves.

If the person is unwilling to be assessed, VicRoads may automatically suspend their licence.

Legal obligations: Drivers have a legal obligation to advise VicRoads of any permanent condition or illness that may impair their ability to drive safely. VicRoads has available a useful checklist to assist drivers (and their spouse or carer) to review and monitor their ability to drive safely (*see the VicRoads' Victorian Older Drivers' Handbook, 5th Edition*). It is also the driver's responsibility to advise their private insurance company about any condition that may

compromise driving abilities. Failure to do so may compromise the person's insurance coverage in the event of an accident.

Transport Options

If driving is no longer an option, help your family member to plan others ways to travel, such as by public transport, community services or taxis. Try to arrange activities that don't involve the use of a car and discuss positive reasons why these options work – they are more relaxing, quicker and there are no parking problems!

Multi-Purpose Taxi Program: This program is available for people with a permanent disability who cannot use public transport. Members pay half the metered taxi fare.

Contact

VicRoads Medical Review Section

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Source: Information sourced from VicRoads' Victorian Older Drivers' Handbook, 5th Edition.