

# Driving and Dementia

## Safety & Loss of Independence



A diagnosis of dementia does not mean that a person should stop driving immediately, but it does mean that at some point the ability to drive safely will be lost. It is a complex issue, affecting both the person living with dementia and the caregiver.

### Safety

- Due to increasing brain damage, the person living with dementia gradually loses the ability to drive safely, which puts them, their passengers and others on the road at risk.
- Depending on where the damage is located in the brain, the person living with dementia may have difficulty coordinating their movements accurately, reacting quickly and appropriately to unexpected road events, and recalling and understanding the rules of the road.
- Lack of insight about one's driving skills increases with progression of the illness, making the conversation about driving more difficult. It is important to discuss driving issues with the person as early as possible in the course of the illness.

It is the responsibility of the person, the person's physician and the caregiver to address the issue of safety and driving cessation. Some of the common warning signs that it may be time to stop driving include:

### Common warning signs:

- Stops in traffic for no reason
- Has difficulty judging distance
- Gets lost while driving
- Sometimes misses traffic signs
- Has close calls (near misses)
- Hits the curb
- Scrapes or dents the car
- Fails to stop for red lights or stop signs
- Sometimes confuses the brake and gas pedals
- Drives slower than the average speed
- Cars seem to appear from nowhere
- Other drivers honk at the person



### Loss of Independence

- Giving up driving is one more loss in a series of losses that are characteristic of dementia. The resulting loss of independence can be felt more acutely by those who rely heavily on the use of their car to access services or to meet people. It may be particularly difficult for those living in rural areas where alternative transportation options are more limited.
- The caregiver also feels that loss if they rely on the person with dementia to drive them around.
- Beyond the loss of independence, people who have been driving most of their adult lives may feel a loss of identity when they give up their car or driver's licence.

Every psychologist, optometrist, medical practitioner and nurse practitioner has the responsibility to report patients who have a medical condition that makes it dangerous for them to drive to RoadSafetyBC.

### Driving Assessments

- The Driver's Medical Examination Report (DMER) is the primary tool used to assess the effects of a medical condition on the person's fitness to drive. An Enhanced Road Assessment (ERA) may also be conducted if RoadSafetyBC determines that more information or assessment is required to determine driver fitness. the decision to revoke their driver's license.
- The ERA is conducted by ICBC on behalf of RoadSafetyBC. The assessment is completed in a vehicle the driver provides. It is designed to evaluate driving skills and behaviour in real-world driving situations that require increased cognitive demand.
- If RoadSafetyBC determines a driver is not fit to drive, a letter is sent to the driver to let them know of the decision to revoke their driver's license.
- If the person is found fit to drive, he/she will not receive a notice from RoadSafetyBC. He/she may also have their driving capability reassessed in intervals determined on a case-by-case basis. A yearly reassessment is typically recommended for drivers with a progressive cognitive impairment.



### Appealing a decision

- If someone disagrees with the final assessment by RoadSafetyBC, they can write to the RoadSafetyBC office to request the decision be reconsidered.
- Anyone can send a written report to RoadSafetyBC regarding concerns about a driver's fitness. Reports must be in writing, give supporting reasons for the concerns, and be from a person who has first-hand knowledge for the concerns.

**Email:** [RoadSafetyBC@gov.bc.ca](mailto:RoadSafetyBC@gov.bc.ca)

**Toll-free phone:** 1-855-387-7747

**Mail:** RoadSafetyBC PO Box 9254, Stn Prov Govt, Victoria, BC V8W 9J2

### Starting the conversation

Wherever possible, introduce the topic of driving early in the illness when the person has the most insight.

- Be prepared to have several conversations. This gives time for the person to get used to the idea of driving cessation and process some of the losses associated with it.
- In most cases, it is easier for the person if they make the decision to stop driving for themselves, rather than have someone else make that decision against their will.
- Try to discuss the topic in a way that will encourage the person to come to their own conclusions regarding driving cessation.
- Keep in mind the person's feelings and possible threat to their self-esteem and independence.

### Consider family and friends

Who is the best person to initiate the discussion?

The person with dementia might be more receptive to talking about driving with someone else, perhaps a family friend or another family member. Some men might prefer talking to other men about the issue.

### Talk to the family physician

Physicians play an important role in the driver fitness assessment process. Talk to the family physician ahead of time about your concerns. Ask the person's doctor to write "Do not drive" on a prescription pad.



### Make safety a priority

Make their safety, passengers' safety and the safety of others on the road the focus of the discussion.

Things to consider when having the conversation:

- Take responsibility for your own feelings and use "I" statements instead of "you" statements in your conversation. For example, *"I am worried about your safety when you are driving."*
- Help the person recognize that their own assessment of their driving ability might be impaired by the illness. Share your observations. Suggest using others' input in order to provide a more complete picture of the situation.
- Recognize the person's past good driving record, but once this is done, refocus the discussion to how dementia can affect their driving abilities.
- Acknowledge that even the best of drivers will be affected negatively by a medical condition. Focus on the illness, not on their lack of skills.
- Stay calm, respectful and positive. Do not use an accusatory tone, since this may incite a defensive attitude.

### Alternatives to driving

Among other things, driving cessation is associated with loss of independence. The conversation with the person with dementia might go more smoothly if you can present alternate ways of getting around instead of using the car. Consider the following alternatives:

- Encourage the use of other modes of transportation prior to the cessation of driving in order encourage comfort with alternatives to driving.
- Organize a driving pool of relatives and friends.
- Have TaxiSaver coupons on hand to use on short notice.
- Find reasons to take public transportation. For example, suggest a change of pace from driving or mention avoiding traffic and the cost of parking.
- Consider having groceries and other purchases delivered to the home.

### Suggestions to prevent the use of the car

- Gently mention that you prefer to drive because it's dark out or there is a lot of traffic.
- It may be necessary to remind the person of their physician's recommendation not to drive, or if their license has been revoked.
- Take the car keys from the person.
- Substitute the car keys with other keys, to let the person hang on to their keys if this is important to them.
- Make the car non-operational (install a kill switch, disconnect the sparkplugs, remove distributor cap, disconnect the battery). If the person is a member of BCAA make sure that BCAA is informed as they may receive phone calls asking for assistance to start the car. These type of measures should be used as a last resort.
- Sell the car.

### Alternatives to Driving: Resources

- **BC Transit**  
(schedules, passes and TaxiSaver)  
[www.bctransit.com](http://www.bctransit.com)  
Phone: 250-385-2551
- **Handy Dart**  
Metro Vancouver: [www.translink.ca](http://www.translink.ca)  
Phone 604-953-3680  
BC Transit: [www.bctransit.com](http://www.bctransit.com)  
Phone: 250-385-2551
- **Taxi Savers + HandyCard**  
(provides a 50% subsidy on cost of using taxis)  
BCTransit: 250-995-5618  
Translink: 604-953-3680 or 778-452-2860  
<https://www.translink.ca/Rider-Guide/Accessible-Transit/HandyCard.aspx>
- **Driving Miss Daisy**  
[www.drivingmissdaisy.ca](http://www.drivingmissdaisy.ca)  
Phone: 1-877-613-2479