



North Dakota's Guide for Aging Drivers

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Table of Contents

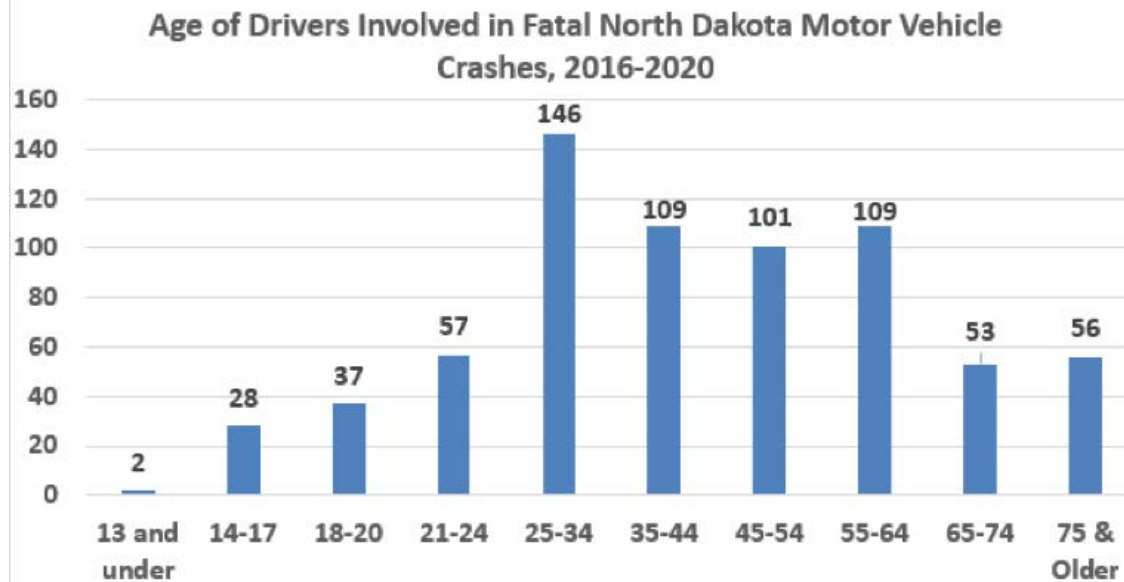
Introduction	3
Statistics	3
Am I Safe to Drive?	4
Assessing Your Driving Skills	4
Family and Caregiver Involvement	6
Medical Community	8
Licensing Requirements	8
Reporting Unsafe Drivers	9
Driver Reexamination Process	10
Safety Tips for Road Users	10
Self-Regulation Tips	11
Keeping Safe While Driving	12
AAA Smart Features	12
Driver Safety Courses	12
Driving Skills Assessment	12
The Impact of Aging on Driving	13
Vision	13
Hearing	14
Medication	14
Cognition	15
Dementia	16
Physical Condition	17
Develop a Transportation Plan	18
Resources	18

Introduction

We all want to maintain our independence as we age. For many people, freedom and independence are linked to their vehicle. It is important to understand that as we age, we need to re-evaluate our driving habits. For example, older drivers who review and improve their driving skills are more likely to continue driving safely. This guide is meant to help North Dakota's aging drivers, their families and caregivers understand how aging and aging-related changes in health status affect the ability to drive safely.

Statistics

According to the 2020 census, persons age 65 and older make up 15.7% of North Dakota's population.



Over the past five years in North Dakota (2016-2020), 109 of the drivers involved in fatal motor vehicle crashes were 65 and older.



Am I Safe to Drive?

A driver's license is an important document that offers mobility and independence, but the time may come when driving is no longer a safe option. The decision to stop driving is never easy. However, the key to a positive transition from driving is *planning*.

Assessing Your Driving Skills

It is important to take personal responsibility and understand how changes in both mental and physical ability can affect driving at any age. No one should be expected to give up his or her driver's license based solely on age. Driving is a privilege and that privilege should be extended to anyone who is able to drive safely and responsibly. As a driver, you play an essential role in making that decision.

Driving is a complex activity requiring a variety of high-level thinking skills, as well as a certain degree of physical strength, flexibility and coordination. As we age, we can experience a decline in a number of areas that affect the ability to drive.

Warning Signs/Self-Assessment

Driving skills may decline at a slow rate. Self-awareness is key to responsible driving. The information below can help determine if you need to change your driving habits or explore other transportation options.

- Do other drivers honk or pass you frequently, even when traffic is moving relatively slow?
- Do you become nervous or anxious when approaching intersections?
- Do you arrive at a location and not remember how you got there?
- Do you notice dents and dings on your vehicle and do not know how they got there?
- Have you had more “close calls” or “near misses” on the road recently?
- Do family or friends comment negatively on your driving habits?
- Do you have any physical restrictions while driving (e.g. difficulty turning the steering wheel, pushing down the foot pedal, looking over my shoulder, etc.)?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, there is help available. Review the resources at the end of this handbook for helpful contact information (see page 17).

Family and Caregiver Involvement

Families, friends or caregivers can help with issues related to aging and safe driving. Before starting the conversation with an older driver, it is important for everyone involved to understand:

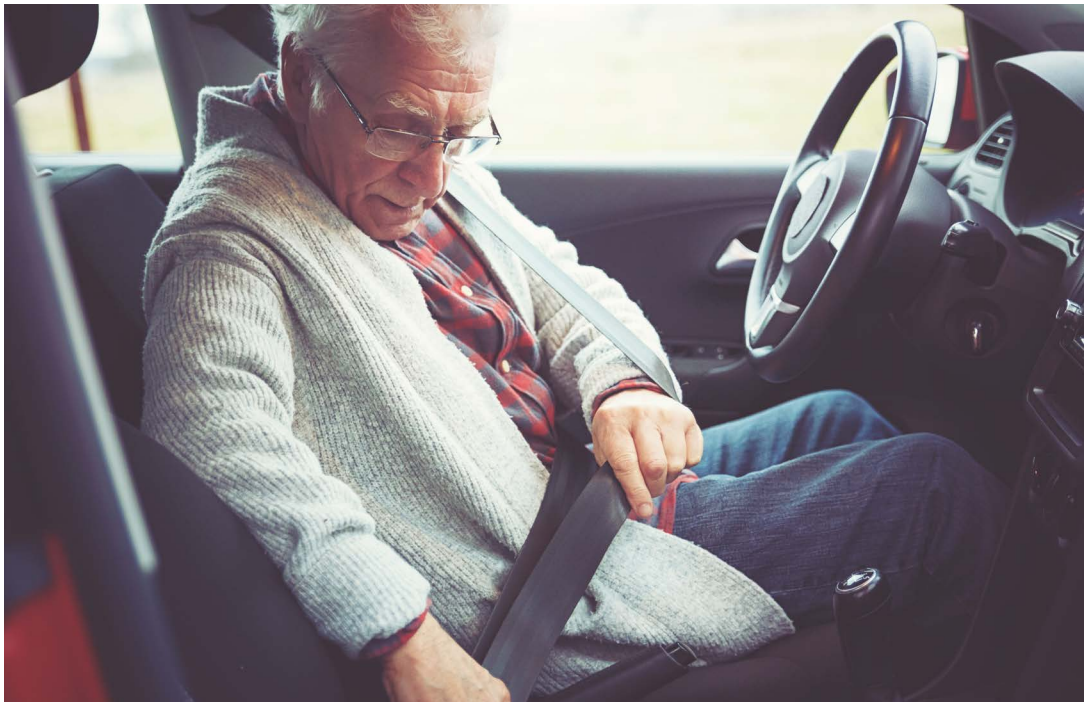
- Driving problem warning signs.
- How to evaluate the driving abilities of an older adult.
- What driving means to your aging loved one.
- How to talk about appropriate driving choices.
- Community resources for evaluating driver skills.
- Strategies for driving retirement.
- Local transportation options.

People delay or avoid the topic with their aging loved one for many reasons:

- Anxieties about the older driver's response; a fear of anger or rejection.
- Concerns about being disrespectful or meddling.
- Rationalizing that because no crisis has occurred, there isn't a need for discussion.

Older drivers struggle with the topic as much as their loved ones. They worry about:

- The loss of freedom and independence.
- Becoming socially isolated and housebound.
- Becoming a burden to family and friends.



Family members or caregivers should be aware of potential problems affecting safe driving when the older adult:

- Is forgetful or confused.
- Uses bad judgement when driving.
- Fails to follow the rules of the road.
- Can't see where they're going.
- Exhibits aggressive driving behavior.
- Drives well below the speed limit.
- Experiences multiple traffic crashes (dents or dings on the car).
- Has neighbors, friends or others who indicate there is a problem.

Developing a transportation plan can ease the transition to driving retirement and allow older adults to maintain their independence and mobility (see page 17).

Medical Community

Health care providers are important partners when planning for safe driving needs.

They help make you more aware of how medical conditions and medications can affect your safe driving fitness. When the effects of a medical condition are progressive, periodic evaluations are necessary. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) Driver Fitness Medical Guidelines, medical conditions that affect safe driving can fall into these three categories:

1. Conditions that create functional limitations.
2. Conditions that involve a possible loss of consciousness.
3. Conditions that require medications incompatible with safe driving.

We are all confronted by health and mobility problems as we age. This does not mean that the medical community can withdraw or suspend driving privileges; only the North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT) Driver License Division has that authority. The health professional's role is to provide the Driver License Division with the information needed to determine the driver's ability to drive safely.

Licensing Requirements

The license renewal cycle is every six years (every four years for ages 78+) and expires on your birthday. Your license can be renewed up to 10 months prior to the expiration date. License renewals include answering general health questions and completing a vision screening.

Additional licensing information can be found online at www.dot.nd.gov/divisions/driverslicense/real-id-information.htm



Reporting Unsafe Drivers

Some older drivers do not realize their driving skills have declined and discussing the problem with them may be difficult. Reporting an unsafe driver may seem drastic, but it may be the only way to keep them and others safe.

The NDDOT Driver License Division receives referrals for driver reexaminations from law enforcement, medical professionals, family or concerned citizens. All information provided remains confidential to the extent permitted by law. Anonymous tips cannot be accepted.

Physicians and optometrists may report to the Driver License Division on a patient's mental and physical qualifications to operate a motor vehicle. This report must be completed by a health care provider licensed, certified or registered in North Dakota or another state.

Driver Reexamination Process

A driver may be required to complete a medical evaluation, a vision examination, written examination, and/or road examination based on the specifics of the reexamination referral.

Safety Tips for Road Users

We all want to maintain our ability to go where we want, especially as we grow older and have more leisure time. Self-awareness is key. People who accurately assess their fitness to drive may be able to make adjustments to stay safe on the road.

With smart self-management, independence that comes with driving may be maintained while limiting risk to yourself and others.

Common driving errors for older drivers include:

- Making left turns.
- Driving at night.
- Merging into traffic.
- Changing lanes.
- Keeping up with the flow of traffic.
- Yielding to traffic.
- Following traffic signals.
- Impaired driving (including prescription and over-the-counter medication).



Self-Regulation Tips

Many older drivers self-restrict their driving to avoid risky situations. Some common strategies are to:

- Drive only during the daylight if you have trouble seeing at night.
- Drive only in good weather.
- Avoid heavy traffic.
- Avoid fast-paced highway driving.
- Avoid driving in unfamiliar areas.
- If left turns are a problem, make three right turns, turn left at traffic lights with a turn arrow, or pick a less busy intersection for your turn.
- Map out safe routes, such as those with well-lit streets, less traffic, clear signs and easy parking.
- Drive with a friend.
- Let someone else drive when you are uncomfortable.

Keeping Safe While Driving

To maintain safety while driving, it is important to know the resources that are available in North Dakota.

AAA Smart Features

The AAA Smart Features for Older Drivers webpage provides a list of features that can compensate for physical changes and make a vehicle safe and comfortable to drive. The list is sorted by challenges that older drivers may experience.

seniordriving.aaa.com

Driver Safety Courses

Refresh your knowledge of safe driving practices, traffic signs and roadway features by taking a driver safety class. Classroom and online classes are available. To find a course near you, contact your local AAA branch or AARP Driver Safety Program.

seniordriving.aaa.com

aarppriversafety.org

Driving Skills Assessment

Consider having your driving evaluated by a professional. A driver rehabilitation specialist or occupational therapist can help you determine if a visual, physical or mental condition is affecting your ability to drive safely. They may also be able to help you develop a plan to compensate for your limitations.

Some drivers require adaptive devices to compensate for physical limitations. Some examples of adaptive equipment are:

- Hand controls.
- Additional mirrors.
- Pedal modifications.
- Steering devices.
- Turn signal extensions.
- Remote switches.

Your local rehabilitation hospital's occupational therapy department may be able to help you locate a program in your area.

The Impact of Aging on Driving

Starting around age 55, there is a decrease in how well we process, remember and judge driving events such as the distance of oncoming traffic. You may notice losses in your vision, memory, strength, flexibility and reaction time. However, it is important to remember that how you age is unique to you. Aging doesn't affect all drivers in the same way.

Your health is closely connected to your ability to drive safely. Reacting to hazards quickly, judging distances correctly, monitoring the speed of traffic and reading road signs require that your body and mind work efficiently together. In addition to the physical and mental changes that can occur as you age, other factors, such as medication, can also affect your ability to drive. It is your responsibility to understand how these changes and use of medications could affect your ability to drive safely.

Vision

The main sense you use while driving is vision. Good vision is essential to good driving health. Vision commonly begins to change after age 40 and it is critical to maintain healthy vision as you age. Declining vision can impact your ability to detect and respond to road signals, signs and changing traffic conditions, and can increase your risk of being involved in a crash.

- A 55-year-old person takes eight times longer to recover from sun glare or bright lights than a 16-year-old.
- Macular degeneration is the leading cause of severe vision loss in people over 60.
- Glaucoma and cataracts are common in people with diabetes.

Have your eyes checked by a vision specialist to help ensure safe driving. If you wear glasses or contacts for driving, please remember to wear them every time you drive, even if traveling short distances.



Hearing

Good hearing is important because it alerts you to sirens, horns and other audio cues needed to drive. Because hearing changes as you age, you should see your audiologist or hearing specialist regularly. If you wear hearing aids, keep them up-to-date and wear them every time you drive. Avoid turning your hearing aid down or off, even if you think that it reduces distraction.

Medication

Many medications and combinations of medications can impact your ability to drive safely. In general, the impairing effects of drugs occur at lower dosages and last longer in aging individuals compared to younger individuals.

[Roadwise RX](#) is a free online tool developed by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety that can be used to explore how medications affect safe driving.

seniordriving.aaa.com

Cognition

Cognition is the act of processing information. It includes your ability to think, use your senses, pay attention, learn, read and problem solve. Driving is a complex activity that requires you to use these skills whether you are driving a short or long distance.

Driving requires you to process and remember several objectives simultaneously, such as how to operate your vehicle in all kinds of conditions, what traffic signs mean and how to get to your destination safely. You must be able to do all these things while processing any other information you encounter when you are behind the wheel.

Impaired cognition may result in:

- Distraction or disorientation while driving.
- Problems maintaining control of your vehicle for long distances.
- Slower response to traffic signs, signals or markings.
- Trouble recognizing changes in traffic conditions, hazards and emergencies.
- Delayed reaction to the position of the other vehicles as they change lanes or as you enter the roadway.
- Trouble recognizing and safely responding to pedestrians and cyclists.
- Problems operating controls such as confusing brake and gas pedals.
- Improper use of turn signals to warn other drivers when turning or changing lanes.
- Trouble planning and safely navigating your driving route.
- Frequently becoming lost or confused when driving.

Dementia

Dementia is a decline of cognition due to loss of, or damage to, nerve cells in the brain and can affect many of the critical abilities you need to drive safely. This may include perception and visual processing, maintaining attention, responding to multiple stimuli, making correct decisions and acting appropriately in difficult situations. Drivers with dementia should be monitored by family and healthcare providers.

The NHTSA Driver Fitness Medical Guidelines (see page 8) provides a list to help determine if a person needs evaluation for possible dementia.

Physical Condition

As we age, we usually lose muscle mass and bone strength, which increases your chance of injury or death in a crash. Drivers age 65 and older are four times more likely to be seriously injured compared to drivers younger than 26.

Aging can cause sensory issues in your hands and feet, such as tingling and numbness. This can affect your ability to feel, grasp, manipulate or release objects. Loss of strength results in trouble keeping a firm grip on your steering wheel or keeping pressure on the pedals with your legs and feet.

Decreased flexibility may cause rigidity or limited range of motion. Vertigo, dizziness or loss of balance can occur along with muscle spasms or tremors that may cause you to lose control of your vehicle.

Physical conditions can be associated with many age-related medical conditions. These conditions include diabetes and arthritis.

Develop a Transportation Plan

Consideration should be given to the transportation options available in the area where you live so you can retire from driving when it is necessary.

Learn about your transportation options now, create your transportation plan and try it out. Options you may have in your area include bus services, senior shuttles, walking, friends and family, taxis, ride-hailing services such as Uber or Lyft, etc.

The NDDOT website has a page dedicated to local bus and transit services in the state. All counties in North Dakota have transit service three to five days a week.

www.dot.nd.gov/divisions/localgov/transit.htm

Resources

NHTSA Driver Fitness Medical Guidelines:

<https://www.nhtsa.gov/sites/nhtsa.gov/files/811210.pdf>

North Dakota Area Agencies on Aging:

<http://www.nd.gov/dhs/services/adultsaging>

State Senior Services Help Line: 1-701-328-4601

State Senior Services Email: dhsaging@nd.gov

Thank you to the State of Michigan for permission to use information from the *Michigan's Guide for Aging Drivers and Their Families*.