

Driving — When to Take the Keys

A recent study shows that people with Alzheimer's should not drive

The early stages of Alzheimer's disease bring changes both to the diagnosed individual and to his or her family. Safety issues become a major concern for the family, but many times, the person with Alzheimer's disease is in denial about his illness or lacks insight into the cognitive and behavioral changes he is experiencing. In these instances, families may be left to make decisions to protect their loved one as well as the public's safety.

Many early-diagnosed individuals drive a car daily and think nothing of it. Not long ago, a Missouri family was forced to think about the issue when a family member left home in a car, and drove from St. Charles, Missouri ending up in a ditch in east Texas. As the family member demonstrated, early stage individuals can still physically drive although memory problems impair their judgment.

Driving is a complex activity that requires quick reactions, clear sensory abilities and split second decisions. David Carr, M.D., Washington University examined several different driving and dementia studies. He found that almost 50% of people with Alzheimer's are twice as likely to be involved in a traffic accident as a person without the disease. Studies also indicate that one third of elderly people killed in auto accidents exhibited brain changes consistent with Alzheimer's disease.

Study results from Johns Hopkins University and the National Institute on Aging support the belief that people

should not be allowed to drive after receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. According to the Johns Hopkins research, more than 40% of patients studied had been in an accident after a diagnosis of the disease. In addition, 11% had caused accidents; 44% had routinely gotten lost; and 75% drove below the speed limit.

Ruth Bischoff, a valuable volunteer for the South Jersey Chapter, experienced first hand the devastation of what could happen to an Alzheimer's individual who gets access to the car. Her late husband, William Bischoff, who was formerly a highly regarded lawyer and an esteemed judge, drove to Lorton,

Virginia and purchased a ticket for the Auto Train. He took the train, then traveled from Central to South Florida and rented himself a condominium. It marked the first time William Bischoff had ever wandered from home. He was missing for two days before his wife was able to locate him.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) guidelines state that individuals who are unable to cook or perform simple household task pose an unacceptable risk and should not continue to drive.

For some families that may mean that a loved one may need to stop driving in

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the very early stages of the disease.

Finding the balance between protecting your loved one's rights and keeping the community safe is difficult. Some families take away the keys at the first sign of significant problems to avoid a life-threatening situation.

Alzheimer's disease is unique in that it destroys a person's ability to remember. Not only do individuals with Alzheimer's not remember how to drive, some may forget what a car is. A person with Alzheimer's disease may be driving to the grocery store she has visited for 20 years and not remember where she is going or how to stop the car.

ACTION STEPS:

Look for signs of driving problems: Be concerned if your loved one forgets how to find familiar places, or makes poor decisions in traffic. Also notice if the person with Alzheimer's becomes angry or confused while driving.

Assess the person's ability to drive: Consider having the impaired person's driving ability tested. Some state agencies

have special driving tests to determine how well a person sees, judges distances and responds to traffic.

Arrange for transportation: Reassure the person with Alzheimer's that rides will be readily available. Most importantly, plan ahead so that rides can be arranged early and drivers secured.

Control access to the car keys:

Designate other individuals to do the driving and give them exclusive access to the car keys.

Ask the family physician to order the Alzheimer's individual to stop driving:

The APA recommends that physicians write prescriptions to dementia patients ordering them to stop driving. Many families find this approach to be a simple and effective solution. Older adults take the advice of family physicians very seriously.

Solicit the support of others: Clergy, relatives and a trusted friend can reinforce the message that driving with Alzheimer's disease can be very dangerous. Also consider having your insurance agent provide documentation that your loved one will no longer be able to get insurance coverage.

Acknowledge the loss: Caregivers need to be especially sensitive to their loved one with Alzheimer's during this difficult period.

Make the car less accessible: Park the car down the street where the person with Alzheimer's disease will not see it. Have a safety starter installed that requires a special key. Even consider disabling the car if necessary (remove the battery or starter wire).

Consider selling the car: By selling the car, you may save enough money on insurance premiums, gas and repair costs to pay for public transportation including taxi rides.

Be firm: Before the disease took hold, your loved one would never have wanted to hurt someone else. It is in everyone's best interest that you stay true to that principle. Avoid arguing with the person or giving long explanations for why he or she cannot drive. Spend your time and energy instead on focusing on activities that the Alzheimer's individual can still enjoy.

Note: The Alzheimer's Association - St. Louis Chapter contributed to this report.