



Community Legal Information Association of Prince Edward Island, Inc.

Driving Safely As You Age

The over-50 population in Prince Edward Island is growing larger – people are living longer and baby boomers are aging. Though the aging process varies from person to person, it eventually results in changes in physical and mental abilities for all of us. These changes may affect our ability to drive.

It is important to learn about these changes so you can adjust for them. Knowing how to adjust may keep you driving longer and will help you remain a safe driver. Your level of independence and your self-esteem can be affected by whether or not you are able to drive.

Remember that driving is a privilege, not a right. Each of us has a responsibility to our family and to our community to ensure that we are driving safely and not endangering our life or the lives of others.

In this pamphlet we will review some of the challenges facing aging drivers and some of the adaptations that can be used to keep you driving safely.

Driving is a complex physical and mental process. As you age, your ability to drive may be affected by:

- Deterioration in vision that occurs naturally in everyone and can begin to be a problem from age 50
- Restricted movement of the head, neck, and trunk due to stiffening joints and muscles
- The slow-down that occurs in thinking processes, like processing a lot of information and making quick decisions
- Medical conditions which become more common and more serious with increasing age
- Medication – prescription, herbal and over-the-counter
- Drug to drug interactions and drug to alcohol interactions that affect your ability to process information quickly
- Loss of hearing
- Emotional upset, grief, or stress in your life
- Conditions such as Alzheimer's disease or other dementias

It is important to pay attention to changes you may be experiencing. There are a number of warning signs you can use for self-evaluation. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are busy intersections harder to understand and get through safely?
- Do vehicles appear suddenly, as if from nowhere?
- Have I been having a growing number of near accidents?
- Have I been involved in minor accidents?
- Am I having difficulty in coordinating hand and foot movements?
- Am I nervous when I drive?
- Do I tire easily from driving?
- Do I have any medical conditions that affect my driving?
- Am I taking medications and do I know the side effects of those medications?

If in doubt, don't drive!

Medication and Aging

Older people take more medications than any other age group, and often don't know about the possible negative effects these could have on driving. It is not easy to predict the side effects of medications because, as we age, we may become more sensitive to the side effects and we also may be taking combinations of medications. Taking a combination of medications increases the likelihood of side effects that can interfere with driving ability.

Some side effects you may have that will impair your ability to drive safely are:

- unsteadiness on your feet
- reduced physical reaction time
- drowsiness
- mental confusion
- dizziness
- cloudy judgement

Many of us are aware of the effects of prescribed medications, but even those sold without a prescription (such as antihistamines, cough syrups, herbal remedies, sleeping aids, and others) can make you drowsy and affect your control of a vehicle. Read the directions carefully to find out about side effects and warnings. Your pharmacist can provide you with important information about drug side effects and drug interactions as well.

Alcohol is probably the single most important human factor in fatal car accidents. Our tolerance of alcohol decreases steadily as we get older, regardless of how much we drank when we were young. This is because we are less efficient at ridding our body of the alcohol. Food, mood, fatigue, medication, general health, weight, and body size can all make a difference in the overall effect of alcohol on our system.

Driving a motor vehicle under the influence of medication or alcohol is impaired driving. There are grave consequences to driving while impaired. The legal system takes it very seriously and results may include:

- A criminal record
- A sentence imposed by a judge - usually jail or a fine
- Cancellation of your driver's license by the province

- Refusal by your insurance company to pay for injuries to you or your passengers if an accident occurs
- Increased insurance premiums or cancellation of your car insurance policy
- A law suit by someone who has suffered injury, death of a family member or property damage because of an accident caused by your impaired driving

Driving without your glasses, or after you get drops in your eyes to dilate your pupils, or after general anesthetic for day surgery also endangers your safety and the safety of others and could result in negligence charges being laid against you.

What is a "Motor Vehicle"?

In the *Criminal Code*, a "motor vehicle" is broadly defined to include any vehicle driven by means other than muscle power. This includes:

- cars motorcycles motorized bicycles
- snowmobiles golf carts tractors
- self-propelled lawnmowers all-terrain vehicles boats
- motorized wheelchairs snowblowers horse and wagon

Penalties for driving while impaired apply to anyone having "care and control" of a motor vehicle. Care and control is broadly interpreted and could mean that, even if you are sitting in the driver's seat of a stopped car in a parking lot, you could be charged.

What Can I Do To Ensure I Am Driving Safely?

If you are aware of problems you are experiencing, there are steps you can take that may increase safety for yourself, your passengers, and the public. These include:

- Drive in familiar areas.
- Avoid stressful traffic situations such as rush hour.
- Don't drive when you're emotionally upset.
- Take medications as prescribed.
- Don't drive when you don't feel well.
- Take a passenger to navigate for you whenever possible.
- Keep physically fit and exercise regularly to keep your neck and trunk flexible.
- Plan your route to ensure that you make mostly right-hand turns – research indicates that left-hand turns are when many accidents involving aging drivers occur.
- Limit night-time driving if you have trouble with glare from headlights.
- Be aware that prescription and over-the-counter medications may impair your driving ability.
- Check with your doctor to learn what side effects a medication might have and what you can do to make adjustments for them. Make sure the doctor you see knows about every medication you are taking.
- Use one pharmacist. Pharmacists keep computerized records and can often spot problems early. Ask about side effects of medication and read labels on medications to learn if they can affect your driving ability.
- Don't drink alcoholic beverages if you're driving and don't ride with someone who has been drinking.
- Don't combine medications and alcohol.

- Find out if there is anything you can do to decrease the side effects of medications.
- Update and refresh your skills and knowledge by attending a driver retraining or improvement course. Call Highway Safety Division to see if there is a course being offered near you.

What about using a cell phone?

A cellular phone can be an important safety tool for motorists. It can be used to report accidents or crimes or to call someone if your car breaks down or you need help.

However, the use of a cell phone while driving can impair your ability to respond to driving conditions and situations. Using a cell phone takes your attention away from driving. For safe use of cell phones, follow these guidelines:

- Use your phone only when parked
- Ask a passenger to make the call for you
- Let your voice mail pick up the call if your phone rings while you are driving
- Pull over and park to place calls or listen to messages

There Comes A Day

Keeping your driver's license may be important for your mobility, your independence and your well-being. Most of us are able to recognize our own limitations and compensate for them. It is important to continue to monitor your own performance and to voluntarily stop driving under conditions you find difficult (e.g. rainy nights) or when you think it is no longer safe for you to drive or when you are advised not to drive by a physician.

The decision to restrict or remove someone's driving privileges is not made quickly or lightly. The PEI Highway Safety Division will try to keep you driving under appropriate restrictions for your situation. Restrictions may include driving in daytime only, or not driving out-of-province on unfamiliar highways. These restrictions may be temporary, while you check with a medical professional or while a problem is corrected, or they may become permanent.

Vehicle manufacturers and highway engineers are considering the needs of an aging population of drivers as they design new vehicles and roadways. However, new vehicles with new features can be a distraction when driving. It is the responsibility of the driver to become completely familiar with all aspects of vehicle operation, including anti-lock braking systems, speed control systems, air quality systems and entertainment systems.

You have the right to ask a dealer about instructions for operation so you aren't preoccupied with "how things work" while driving.

When your own self-examination and other factors tell you that you can no longer drive safely, you will have to think about other ways to get around. There are alternatives to driving, but you will need to plan ahead. You might want to contact your local seniors groups to see if your area has a bus service. Or there may be groups working toward improving public transportation on PEI that you could join.

The information in this pamphlet is intended to help you be more aware of potential changes in your ability to drive safely and to suggest steps you can take to stay in control.

Contact your Highway Safety Division or the PEI Senior Citizens' Federation Inc. to learn about what else you can do to keep yourself driving safely. Some areas offer courses or programs to help drivers improve their ability to adapt to changes in physical or mental condition. It is in everyone's best interests to learn what is being done and what might keep you mobile for the longest possible time.

This pamphlet contains general information the law. It is not a complete statement of the law in this area and is not a substitute for legal advice. To receive legal advice, you need to speak to a lawyer. Community Legal Information Association of PEI Inc. (CLIA) is a charitable organization that receives funding from Justice Canada, the Prince Edward Island Office of the Attorney-General, the Law Foundation of PEI and other sources. CLIA provides Islanders with understandable and useful information about the law and the justice system in Prince Edward Island.

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