

# moving rightalong

OBLIGATIONS AND  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
OLDER DRIVERS



Information Sheet 3

# Driving and your health



**Government of South Australia**

Department of Planning,  
Transport and Infrastructure

# moving rightalong

## **Moving Right Along: Obligations and Opportunities for Older Drivers encourages safer, greener and more active travel for older South Australians.**

It comprises a series of Information Sheets about fitness to drive and legal responsibilities, driver assessments, ideas for maintaining the ability to drive safely and planning for the time when you, a family member or friend will decide to drive less or stop driving altogether.

### **Driving and your health**

Your health is vital to your continuing role as a safe driver. Maintain regular health checks, get plenty of sleep and be aware that medical conditions and medications may affect your fitness to drive. Remember - it's your health and your responsibility.

### **Staying healthy**

- Eat a healthy, balanced diet and drink lots of water.
- Have a regular eyesight check and keep spectacle prescriptions current. Even small changes in your eyesight should be checked.
- Keep medications current.
- Loss of hearing is not a reason to stop driving but it may affect your ability to hear warning signals and emergency sirens. People who are completely deaf can be licensed to drive.
- Get plenty of exercise to improve flexibility, strengthen your arms and legs, keep you alert and contribute to a good night's sleep.

### **Your general health**

As your body ages you may become aware of little changes that can affect your movement and mobility. You might have noticed that you respond more slowly or feel confused in an unexpected situation. A debilitating health condition may make some movements painful. Medication may make you feel drowsy, nauseous or dizzy. You may notice that you bump objects when walking or have to ask people to repeat what they have just said to you.

Any of these factors could influence your ability to drive safely. To find out more, talk about your concerns with your health professional. No-one wants to take your licence from you while you can drive safely. There are many ways that enable you to continue driving for as long as possible.

### **The importance of a good night's sleep**

A good night's sleep can make a big difference to how you feel and can affect the skills and concentration you need to be a safe driver. Older adults need about the same amount of sleep as younger adults - seven to nine hours per night - but may sleep less deeply and wake more often during the night. To improve your sleep at night:

- a regular schedule - try to go to sleep and wake up at the same time, even on weekends
- try not to nap too much during the day - you might be wide awake at bed time
- exercise daily to improve the quality of your sleep and help you to sleep more soundly
- enjoy a milk-based hot drink or herbal tea late in the day instead of drinking caffeine beverages that keep you awake
- create a safe and comfortable place for sleep and develop a bedtime routine. Do the same thing each night to tell your body that it is time to unwind. Some people read a book or soak in a warm bath.

If you are so tired during the day that you cannot function normally and this lasts more than 2 - 3 weeks, see your health professional for help and advice.

### **Sleep disorders**

Poor sleep is not a normal part of ageing. It contributes to fatigue, depressed moods, attention and memory problems, excessive daytime sleepiness and use of medication. In particular, fatigue makes you less alert to what is happening on the road and less able to react quickly and safely if a dangerous situation arises.

The most common sleep disorders among older adults are insomnia (difficulty falling asleep), sleep-disordered breathing, such as snoring and sleep apnoea (pauses in breathing during sleep), and movement disorders like 'restless legs' syndrome.

Obstructive sleep apnoea is more common among older adults and people who are significantly overweight. It can result in the sufferer being starved of oxygen during the night. Obstructive sleep apnoea greatly increases a person's risk of high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease and can lead to other health problems.

Your health professional can advise and refer you to a sleep specialist if he or she believes you are suffering from a sleep disorder.

For more Information please refer to:

#### **Information Sheet 2**

Fitness to drive



### How can I tell if I have a condition that could affect my driving?

If you are in any doubt at all, ask your health professional for advice on specific medical conditions and the effects that they may have on your fitness to drive. Support groups and foundations also give information and assistance.

The Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure can also help with information about driver licence requirements related to specific medical conditions.

Depending on their severity, some medical conditions e.g. arthritis, Parkinson's disease, dementia, glaucoma, cataracts, macular degeneration may require:

- regular reviews
- licensing restrictions
- an Assessment and/or a Practical Driving Assessment to determine if you can retain your class of licence.

It is important for the safety of yourself and other road users that your condition is stable and controlled.

For more Information please refer to:

#### Information Sheet 4

Driver Medical Assessment

#### Information Sheet 5

Practical Driving Assessment

### Your legal responsibility

As a licensed driver in South Australia and regardless of your age, you are **legally required** to report any medical condition or medication that may affect your ability to drive a motor vehicle safely. Please contact a Service SA customer service centre [www.sa.gov.au/contact-us](http://www.sa.gov.au/contact-us) or call 13 10 84 for information regarding reporting a medical condition.

Also, health professionals are **legally required** to notify the Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure as soon as they consider that you suffer from a physical or mental illness, disability or deficiency, or take medication that would be likely to endanger the public if you drive a motor vehicle.

The health professional does not need your permission as this notification is **compulsory by law**.

#### The consequences for failing to notify a reportable medical condition and continuing to drive are severe.

If involved in a crash:

- you may be charged with related driving offences and with failing to notify a reportable medical condition
- you may be sued for any damages to people or property caused by the driver in that crash
- your private car insurance coverage may be affected.

## Dementia

Dementia is a broad term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses that cause a progressive decline in a person's mental functioning. These include loss of short and long-term memory, decline in intellect, rationality, social skills and normal emotional reactions.

Most people develop symptoms of dementia gradually over a period of years. Its progress is unpredictable and is different for each individual. With the ageing of our population, the incidence of dementia is estimated to increase significantly in coming decades.

Dealing with dementia is very difficult - for the people who have dementia, for their families, carers and friends. It requires sensitive care and understanding.

### Facts about dementia

- There are currently over 250,000 people in Australia with dementia – this figure is estimated to rise to almost 1 million by 2050, an increase of 400%.
- More than 70 medical conditions can cause dementia. Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia, accounts for between 50% and 70% of all cases.
- While the risk of dementia increases with age, it is not a normal part of ageing.
- Dementia most commonly occurs in people over the age of 65 years, but can occur in people in their 40s and 50s.
- Between the ages of 60-64, the dementia rate is 1 in 100 people. This figure rises to 1 in 4 for people over the age of 85.

## Dementia and driving

A diagnosis of dementia does not mean that you are immediately incapable of driving. However, dementia often produces progressive and irreversible loss of mental functioning, and eventually will affect a person's ability to drive safely. In addition to memory loss, dementia can cause reduction in concentration, sight problems and judgement. When your ability to drive is affected you will be a risk, not only to yourself but to others on the road.

Some people recognise their declining ability and decide to limit their own driving or give up driving altogether. However, others may not see that their driving ability has deteriorated and may resist advice to reduce or stop driving. Some may simply forget that they can no longer drive safely.

Remember that some conditions have similar symptoms to dementia and can be effectively treated. It is worth asking your health professional to explain your condition carefully and discuss any available treatment that might help you continue driving for longer.

## Warning signs

Warning signs that dementia is affecting your driving behaviour may have been occurring for some time without being recognised. Signs can include:

- Reaction time - Can you turn, stop or accelerate your car quickly?
- Problem solving - Do you become upset and confused when more than one thing happens at the same time?
- Coordination - Have you become clumsy and started to control the car differently because you are uncoordinated?
- Alertness - Are you aware of what is happening around you?
- Decision-making - Can you tell the difference between left and right?
- Memory - Do you become confused on familiar routes or get lost easily?
- Can you read a road map easily?
- Mood - Does your mood change when you are driving? Some previously calm drivers may become aggressive or angry.

Talk about your problems openly with family members. Ask them to help you make the decision to stop driving and find ways to maintain your travelling independence.

For more Information please refer to:

### Information Sheet 2

Fitness to drive

### Information Sheet 10

Are you worried about someone's driving?

For resources and contact details of relevant government departments and other organisations refer to Information Sheet 11.

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[www.movingrightalong.sa.gov.au](http://www.movingrightalong.sa.gov.au)

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