

Driving and dementia

A person who has been diagnosed with dementia may be able to continue driving for some time, although they must fulfil certain legal requirements. When the person's condition deteriorates to the point where they are unsafe on the roads, they must stop driving. For many people, this is very difficult to accept. This sheet explains the legal situation and gives some tips on stopping driving.

Can a person with dementia still drive?

A diagnosis of dementia is not in itself necessarily a reason to stop driving. What matters, from both a legal and a practical point of view, is whether or not an individual is still able to drive safely.

For experienced drivers, driving may seem to be a largely automatic activity. In fact, driving is a complicated task that requires a split-second combination of complex thought processes and manual skills. To drive, a person needs to be able to make sense of and respond to everything they see, to 'read the road', to follow road signs, to anticipate and react quickly to the actions of other road users, to take appropriate action to avoid accidents, and to remember where they are going.

Many people with dementia retain learned skills and are able to drive safely for some time after diagnosis. However, as dementia progresses it has serious effects on memory, perception and the ability to perform even simple tasks. People with dementia will, therefore, eventually lose the ability to drive. The stage at which this happens will be different for each person with dementia.

What if the person is unsure of their ability to drive?

People with a diagnosis of dementia can take a driving assessment if they are unsure of their ability to continue driving. They should apply directly to an assessment centre and will need to pay a fee. There is a list of assessment centres at the end of this sheet.

An assessment is not like a driving test. It is an overall assessment of the impact that dementia is having on a person's driving performance and safety and it makes some allowances for the bad habits that drivers get into.

Giving up driving

Many people with dementia choose to stop driving because they begin to find it stressful or they lose confidence. A person should consider stopping driving if:

- They feel less confident or more irritated when they drive
- They feel confused if there are roadworks, for example, on a familiar route
- They feel worried about having an accident.

A person who feels like this will need support and understanding from their carer and family members. They may feel bad about stopping driving if they have always driven their partner/family around. However, it is better to travel safely on public transport than risk an accident in a car. If the person with dementia decides to stop driving they should return their licence to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

If the person with dementia intends to continue driving

Anyone who holds a current driving licence or wants to reapply for a new licence must, by law, inform the DVLA if they are given a diagnosis of dementia and intend to continue driving.

Notification of the diagnosis should be sent with the person's full name, address, date of birth and the driver number on the driving licence, if known, to:

Drivers Medical Group

DVLA
Swansea SA99 1TU

Telephone: 0870 600 0301 (weekdays 8.15am-4.30pm)

Website: <http://www.dvla.gov.uk/>

The DVLA will send the person a questionnaire that seeks permission for the DVLA to obtain medical reports from the person's GP and/or specialists. Once the person returns this questionnaire, the DVLA will contact their GP and, based on the medical information it receives, it will make a decision as to whether the person can continue to drive or not. The DVLA may also ask the person to take a driving assessment.

A person with a diagnosis of dementia would be breaking the law if they did not tell the DVLA about their diagnosis, and they could be fined up to £1,000. If a person with dementia does not inform the DVLA about their diagnosis and continues to drive against advice from their doctor, the doctor may inform the DVLA if there is a significant deterioration in the person's condition. Other people, such as family members, neighbours or police officers, may also contact the DVLA (in writing) and ask it to carry out a medical investigation if they are concerned about a person's fitness to drive.

A person with a diagnosis of dementia must also immediately inform their car insurance company. If they do not, their policy may become invalid. It is a criminal offence to drive without at least third party cover.

If the DVLA decides that the person can continue driving

If the DVLA decides that the person can continue to drive, they will issue a new driving licence that will be valid for a limited period. The person's condition will be reviewed at least once a year. It is also a good idea for relatives, or others close to the person with dementia, to tactfully monitor the person's driving skills on a regular basis.

Reducing the risks

People with dementia can take steps to minimise their risk through driving. Short drives on familiar roads at quiet times of day generally present fewer problems than long, unfamiliar journeys or journeys in heavy traffic.

People on certain types of medication, such as night sedation or drugs for anxiety, depression or other psychiatric disorders, may find that their driving ability is affected. Ask the GP whether anything can be done about this.

If the DVLA decides that the person must stop driving

If the DVLA decides that the person cannot continue driving, the person must return their driving licence. They can appeal against the decision within six months.

Encouragement to stop driving

The person with dementia may be very reluctant to stop driving even if the DVLA has concluded that they are not safe to drive. They may need some encouragement from carers, family members or friends.

Anybody trying to encourage a person with dementia to give up driving should acknowledge how difficult this can be for the person. They may have relied on driving as their main means of transport for much of their life.

Giving up driving will seem especially hard if physical problems make it difficult to use public transport. In some areas, cuts in public transport mean that it is very difficult to get about without a car. It is not always an easy decision to make.

A person who has to give up driving may feel unhappy about losing some of their independence. It may be helpful to encourage the person to take charge of their new transport arrangements - perhaps by opening and managing their own taxi account.

Alternatives to driving

If someone is feeling bad about no longer being able to drive, it may help to point out some of the positive alternatives. For example:

- They could get a taxi to take them to the supermarket once a month; they could set up an account with a taxi firm they trust and like, and order taxis in advance.
- They could get a shoppers' bus to the supermarket and back.
- If they have a computer, they can order all their shopping online and have it delivered to the house.
- They could ask the hospital about a driver to take them to hospital appointments.

- They could pay their bills by Direct Debit so that they don't need to visit the bank or post office so often.

There are also some benefits to not driving:

- The person will no longer have to look for parking spaces or pay for parking permits.
- They will no longer have to pay for petrol and car insurance, freeing up a significant amount of money each month.
- They won't have the stress of remembering routes and finding their way.

If the person refuses to stop driving

Some people refuse to stop driving even though they have been assessed as being unsafe and their carer has tried to encourage them to stop and pointed out alternatives. This can be a very difficult and upsetting situation. Unfortunately there are no straightforward solutions; the best action to take will depend on the individual involved.

Carers in this situation can call the Alzheimers Helpline for further advice or ask for advice from others in a similar situation on Talking Point, the Alzheimer's Society's discussion forum, at www.alzheimers.org.uk/TalkingPoint

Driving Assessment Centres

Cornwall Mobility Centre

Tehidy House
Royal Cornwall Hospital
Truro
Cornwall TR1 3LJ

Telephone: 018 7225 4920

Derby DrivAbility

Kingsway Hospital
Kingsway
Derby DE22 3LZ

Telephone: 013 3237 1929

Disability Assessment Team (DART)

Ditton Ward, Preston Hall Hospital
London Road
Aylesford
Maidstone
Kent ME20 7NJ

Telephone: 016 2279 5719

Hertfordshire Action on Disability Mobility Centre (HAD)

The Woodside Centre
The Commons
Welwyn Garden City
Hertfordshire AL7 4DD

Telephone: 017 0732 4581

Kilverstone Mobility Assessment Centre

2 Napier Place
Thetford
Norfolk IP24 3RL

Telephone: 018 4275 3029

Mobility Advice and Vehicle Information Service (MAVIS)

Crowthorne Business Estate
Old Wokingham Road, Crowthorne
Berkshire RG45 6XD

Telephone: 013 4466 1000

Mobility Centre

Regional Neurological Centre
Hunters Road
Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4NR

Telephone: 019 1219 5694

Mobility Service of the Disabled Living Centre (West of England)

The Vassall Centre
Gill Avenue
Fishponds
Bristol BS16 2QQ

Telephone: 011 7965 9353

Northern Ireland Driving Assessment Service

Northern Ireland Forum Centre
Disability Action
Portside Business Park
189 Airport Road
Belfast BT3 9ED

Telephone: 028 9029 7880

Queen Elizabeth's Foundation Mobility Centre

Damson Way
Fountain Drive
Carshalton, Surrey SM5 4NR

Telephone: 020 8770 1151

Regional Driving Assessment Centre

Westheath Hospital

Rednal Road
Birmingham B38 8HR

Telephone: 0121 627 8228

Fax: 0121 627 8629

Scottish Driving Assessment Service

Astley Ainslie Hospital
133 Grange Loan
Edinburgh EH9 2HL

Telephone: 013 1537 9192

Wales Mobility and Driving Assessment Service

The North Wales Disability Resources Centre
Glan Clwyd Hospital
Bodelwyddan
Denbighshire LL18 5UJ

Telephone: 017 4558 4858

Wales Mobility and Driving Assessment Service

The South Wales Disability Resources Centre
Rookwood Hospital
Fairwater Road
Llandaff
Cardiff CF5 2YN

Telephone: 029 2055 5130

William Merritt Disabled Living Centre and Mobility Services

St Mary's Hospital
Green Hill Road
Armley

Leeds LS12 3QE

Telephone: 011 3305 5288

Wrightington Mobility Centre

Wrightington Hospital

Hall Lane

Appley Bridge

Wigan WN6 9EP

Telephone 01257 256 409

Further information may also be accessed on the DVLA website: www.direct.gov.uk/motoring

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