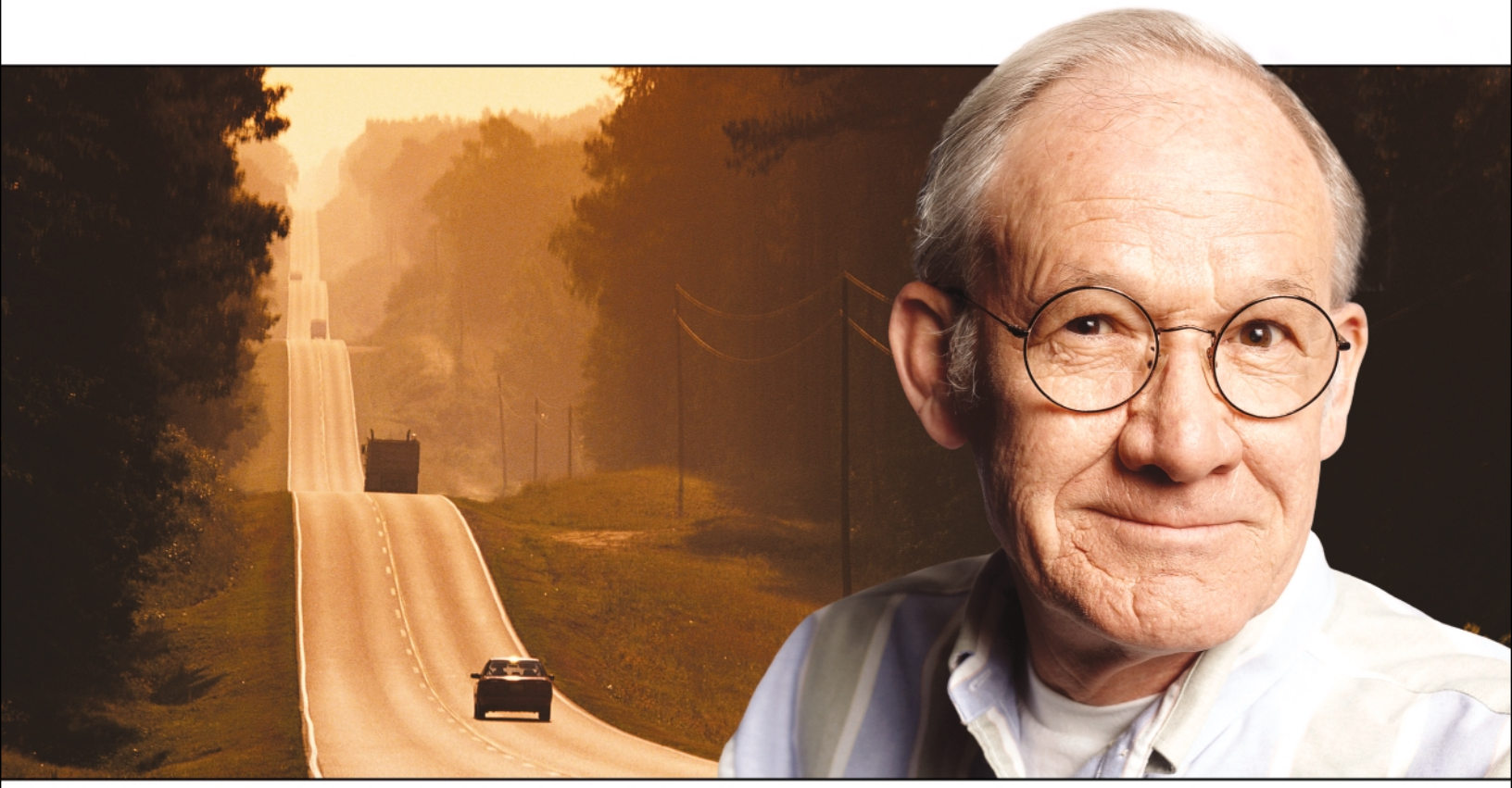
How's My Driving?

SIMPLE TIPS FOR MAINTAINING DRIVING SKILLS



Driving is a physical exercise which requires a certain level of strength, flexibility and coordination to do safely. As we age, some decline in our physical fitness is inevitable. However, studies have shown that exercise can actually slow down the aging process. Flexibility fitness training can be an effective tool in improving range of motion and increasing levels of fitness among older drivers, resulting in better driving skills.

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Exercise and physical activity are essentially a "tune-up" for our heart, muscles and joints. An effective exercise program should do three things: challenge your heart and lungs aerobically, stretch and strengthen your muscles, and loosen your joints to make them flexible. Flexibility permits drivers to move their entire body, including their joints, more freely in order to observe the road from all angles and eliminate traffic blind spots.

The following exercises are designed to improve flexibility as it relates to driving. As with any new exercise program, you should consult your physician before attempting them. Keep in mind that flexibility varies from person to person – only stretch as far as is comfortable for you, and always stop if you feel pain. When beginning these exercises, move slowly and avoid jerky movements.

CHIN FLEXION-EXTENSION:

1. Bend head forward, touching chin on chest.
2. Tilt head backward until forehead is parallel to the ceiling.

Repeat five times in each direction.
Useful for checking images in your mirrors, preventing fatigue.

NECK ROTATION:

1. Turn neck as far to the right as possible.
2. Turn neck as far to the left as possible.

Repeat five times in each direction.
Useful for looking over your shoulder to check for blind spots, parallel parking, adjusting mirrors, reversing.

TRUNK ROTATION:

1. From a sitting position, slowly rotate your trunk, from waist up, to the left. Try to keep hips in place, facing forward.
2. Return to the forward position.
3. Repeat move to the right.

Repeat five times in each direction.
Useful when parallel parking, reversing, adjusting mirrors.

For more exercises, visit the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety web site at www.seniordrivers.org or call 1-800-993-7222 to request a brochure.

Keen Eyesight Is Essential for Safe Driving

"I need to head home before it gets dark." How many times have you heard or said this? Chances are, if you know a senior driver – or are one yourself – this is a phrase that hits close to home.

Making safe decisions behind the wheel relies heavily on our eyesight. Approximately 90% of the decisions we make while driving are based on information acquired through the eyes. But as we age, our eyesight begins to deteriorate and becomes progressively worse.

The amount of light we need to drive roughly doubles every 13 years. To put this into perspective, a 60 year old requires 10 times as much light as an 18 year old to drive, and will take twice as long to adjust to changes in light and darkness.

Our ability to focus quickly from near to far also declines. An example of this would be looking up from the speedometer to the road ahead. Younger drivers need only about two seconds to adjust their focus, whereas drivers over 40 may take three seconds or more. As we age, the amount of time needed to change focus steadily increases. This condition makes it more difficult to judge distances and speed.

As we age, the lenses of our eyes thicken, our pupils shrink, and we experience a loss of muscle elasticity in the eye area. All of this contributes to an increased sensitivity to light and glare. Sunlight or headlights from an oncoming vehicle may impede an older driver's view. Just as we take longer to focus, a 55-year-old driver takes eight times as long to recover from glare than a 16-year-old driver.

In addition, colors (especially red) become harder to see. An older driver may take twice as long as a younger driver to observe the brake lights of the vehicle in front of them.

Transportation Alternatives

The time may come when you or a loved one will decide to stop driving. Here are some alternatives to assist with your transportation needs, should that time arrive:

- Municipal buses.
- Vehicles driven by friends, family members, church members, home health aides, or volunteers.
- Transportation operated by senior citizen centers, hospitals, or retirement communities.
- Taxi and limousine services.

For more information, look on the back panel of this publication.

Other eyesight concerns also affect our driving ability. Our peripheral vision narrows, our depth perception declines, and we may develop cataracts, glaucoma or macular degeneration. Depth perception is crucial in judging how fast other cars are moving and approaching you. Macular degeneration affects the central field of vision and usually results in the inability to drive.

To cope safely with a decline in vision, you must recognize your limitations and be aware of unsafe driving habits. The following practices may help:

- Have regular eye exams – some eye problems can be corrected, especially if caught early.
- Avoid tinted windshields, and wear sunglasses when glare is a problem.
- If possible, avoid driving at night, during rush hours, and in inclement weather.
- Avoid wearing glasses that restrict your side vision.
- Avoid driving vehicles with large blind spots.
- Keep your headlights and windshield clean and properly maintained.
- Turn your head frequently to compensate for diminished peripheral vision.
- Look ahead to see trouble before you reach it.
- If you require glasses, wear them while driving.

HOW'S MY DRIVING?

Every year, motorists travel a combined 96,583,882,000 miles on Michigan roadways. These motorists have a responsibility to ask themselves: "How's My Driving?"

As older drivers, it is our responsibility to maintain high-quality driving habits – or consider other avenues of transportation – for the safety of others and ourselves.

As we grow older, our bodies react less quickly in certain situations. Our eyes grow worse, our hearing is lessened, and our fine motor skills may decrease. We begin to process things more slowly, and the world appears to be moving at a much faster pace. The amount of cars on the roadway has notedly increased, and it may cause us to become confused, angry or over-burdened in our driving abilities. At this point, it is important that we are not afraid to put restrictions on our own driving.

Research has shown that, even though they travel fewer miles per year, older drivers are more prone to be seriously injured or killed in an accident. Based on the estimated annual miles traveled, the fatality rate for drivers 65 and older is an astonishing 17 times higher than the rate for drivers 25 to 64 years old.

No one should be expected to give up their driver's license based solely on their age. There are people of every age that are safe, responsible drivers. The goal is to keep older drivers on the highway as long as they can safely drive. To assist in reaching this goal you can complete a self-assessment test or take a driver refresher / evaluation course. These courses do not report to the Secretary of State, and are designed to educate the driver about unsafe driving behaviors, rules of the road, new laws and defensive driving behavior.

Do you need to change your driving habits? Take this self-assessment test to find out!

Do other drivers honk or pass you frequently, even when traffic is moving relatively slowly? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Do you become nervous or anxious when approaching intersections? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Have you found yourself in more close calls and near-misses on the road? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Do you arrive at a location and not remember how you got there? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Have your family and friends commented negatively on your driving habits? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Are the police stopping you more often? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Do you notice more dents and dings in your vehicle and do not know how they got there? ❒ Yes ❒ No

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then it could be time to recognize that your fine motor skills may be declining. Based on your "yes" answers, ask yourself:

Are there ways I can improve on my driving habits? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Should I consider public transportation or an alternate means of transportation? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Am I physically in shape to drive? ❒ Yes ❒ No

Am I required to take medication that conflicts with my ability to drive in a safe manner? ❒ Yes ❒ No

If the answers to these questions still indicate a need for change, there is help available. See the back panel of this informational guide for helpful resources.

Rochester Hills Improves Street Signs: Seniors to Benefit

Several years ago, the City of Rochester Hills began a project to improve street signs throughout its city. The purpose for the improvement project was to make signs that were larger and easier to read. City officials believed that larger signs would help reduce traffic crashes – especially during dark driving conditions – particularly for older drivers.

Using demographic studies, the city traffic engineer and staff determined where a majority of the city's elderly population resided. Based on these studies, two road segments – in the southern and eastern sections of the city – were chosen as pilot projects.

First, the city upgraded the signs in the test areas. The old street signs, which were fabricated using the minimum engineering standards for street signs used in most communities, were replaced with bigger, sturdier signs featuring larger, more reflective lettering. This was done at all local street intersections with major roads. In addition, the city installed even larger, more noticeable signs at all of the major intersections.

The city then gathered crash data from the two pilot locations, concentrating on a time period of 15-20 months before and after the placement of the new signs. What they found left little doubt that the new signage had a positive impact.

Researchers found that the larger signs were easier to read from longer distances in the daylight hours. In addition, the highly reflective materials and larger signs made a dramatic impact on night-time driving safety.

According to the city's research, the new signs reduced dark-time crashes by 40.1%, and the number of injured persons in the study area by 31.4%.

In a final statewide report in "Michigan's Elderly Mobility," city officials indicated that all citizens, especially older drivers, benefited from the change.

The City of Rochester Hills project is now being used as a model for other communities.

Buying A New Vehicle? Consider This!

Many newer vehicles offer safety and mobility features you may not have considered. When looking for a new car, consider the following options:

- Bright colored vehicles – especially white – are easier for other drivers to see.
- Adjustable seat belts are more comfortable.
- Adjustable brake and gas pedals provide for a safer, more comfortable seating position, further away from the airbag.
- Front and side impact airbags provide increased protection.
- Firm, adjustable seats provide a proper fit and increase visibility and comfort.
- Rear window defrosters help eliminate potential blind spots.
- Larger windows and smaller pillar posts minimize blind spots.
- Controls that are easy to read, reach and operate help prevent distracted driving.
- Anti-lock brakes improve stopping and steering control during sudden stops.
- Remote keyless entry provides quick and safe access to your vehicle.
- Power windows and locks help prevent distracted driving.

Helpful Resources:

SOME USEFUL WEB SITES

Free Internet access is available at many libraries.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:
www.nhtsa.dot.gov

US Department of Transportation – Federal Highway Administration:
http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov • www.byways.org

American Association of Retired Persons:
www.aarp.org

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety:
www.seniordrivers.org • www.aaafoundation.org

Michigan State Police:
www.michigan.gov/msp

Secretary of State (Driver Improvement Hearings):
www.michigan.gov/sos

Traffic Improvement Assoc. of Oakland County:
www.tiami.org

Try your insurance company's web site

Driver Rehabilitation and Evaluation Centers

To locate a driver evaluation and rehabilitation center near you, contact the Association of Driver Educators for the Disabled at **1-800-290-2344** or **www.aded.net.**

Local Hospital Occupational Therapy Unit

Contact your local hospital occupational therapy unit to see if they offer a driving program geared towards the older driver. Many have one in place.

Driver Refresher Courses

- Contact the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) for information on their "55 Alive Mature Driver Program." **888-227-7669**
- Contact your local AAA office for information on their "Safe Driving for Mature Operators Program."
- Contact the National Safety Council for information on their "Coaching the Mature Driver Program." **1-800-621-6244**
- Contact the Traffic Improvement Association for information on their "Mature Driver" Workshops **248-334-4971.**

Self Assessment Guides

- "The Older Driver Skill Assessment and Resource Guide: Creating Mobility Choices." To request a single copy, write to:

  AARP Fulfillment
  601 E Street NW
  Washington, DC 20049
  (Ask for document number D14957)
- "Drivers 55 Plus: Test Your Own Performance" Available for a fee from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. Call **1-800-305-SAFE** and ask for publication 362.

Flexibility Exercises

- Available from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. Call **1-800-305-SAFE** and ask for stock 827.

Transportation Alternatives

- Look in the government section of your phone book
- Contact the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) **888-227-7669** or **www.aarp.org**