



Caring 4 U



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*National Family Caregiver Support Program
Senior Center of Jackson Hole*

Safer Cars Can Help Keep Older Drivers on the Road

Many features in new cars may help accommodate aging drivers, and keep them safely on the road longer. The Auto industry anticipated a need for vehicles with features that can enable folks to remain independent for as long as they want to drive. When a crash occurs involving an older driver, it tends to garner media attention, whereas the same accident with a younger driver would not “That’s unfair to the general population of older adults, who are among the safest drivers on the road,” said Jacob Nelson, the director of traffic safety advocacy and research at AAA. After years of advising others on how to get older drivers to relinquish the car keys, (See “Caring 4 U” October Issue) which often resulted in lost independence, isolation and depression, driving experts like Mr. Nelson focus now on helping older drivers select vehicles that can accommodate their physical disabilities and certain sensory or cognitive losses.

A recent article by Jane Brody in the New York Times, cites several types of situations where the driving experience can be enhanced to provide increased safety and comfort. For example, someone with arthritis might benefit from power seats to easily maneuver not only the best driving position, but also to make it easier to enter and exit the vehicle. Other useful features include power windows and mirrors, a thicker steering wheel that’s easier to grip, automatic tailgate open/close, keyless entry and a push-button to start/stop the engine. Although most new cars currently feature a backup camera, which is great for older adults with flexibility issues, it won’t detect anything in the blind spot. In other words, some features are meant to supplement, not replace, a driver’s visual checks. Whatever features the auto industry invents to

help older drivers, it is still up to each individual behind the wheel to know their limitations and proceed with caution.

Elin Davis, coordinator of the Older Driver Initiative of the American Occupational Therapy Association put it this way, “It’s not about taking away the keys based on age, it’s about function.” This approach is “to support people to enable them to drive as long as possible. Ms. Davis highly recommended a consultation with an occupational therapy driving rehabilitation specialist before selecting features in a car to best fit your health and physical issues. “There’s no such thing as the best car for an older person,” Mr. Nelson said. “What matters are the features appropriate for your individual needs.” AAA has created a very useful computerized site to help older drivers identify the various makes and models of vehicles with various price ranges that may best suit their particular issues, check out SeniorDriving.AAA.com to learn more.

With the exception of advanced dementia or serious visual impairment, “the diagnosis of a medical condition should not determine whether it’s safe for someone to drive,” according to Nelson, “What matters is how you manage your condition.”

The University of Florida’s Institute for Mobility, Activity and Participation has created a free fitness-to-drive screening tool to help families and caregivers assess an older adult’s fitness to get behind the wheel. Find it at fitnesstodrive.php.ufl.edu. This tool rates a driver’s difficulty with 54 driving skills and determines if they are at-risk, routine, or accomplished. Using this tool, plus advanced features can help your older driver stay safely on the road, and provide you, the caregiver with peace of mind.

Family Caregiver Services are available!

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