

# Older Drivers and Risk

*Why be concerned with senior mobility?*



## CHOICES



The road to driving safer and longer



# Older Drivers and Risk

## The value of driving

We as Americans - and especially as Iowans - value the independence of getting around in our own vehicles and staying connected with our families and communities. The majority of older Iowans enjoy a more active, healthy and longer life than previous generations.

Freedom of mobility shapes our quality of life. With aging, driving becomes an increasing concern for older Iowans and their families. How we deal with changes in our driving ability and, eventually, choose when and how to retire from driving, will affect our safety and our quality of life.

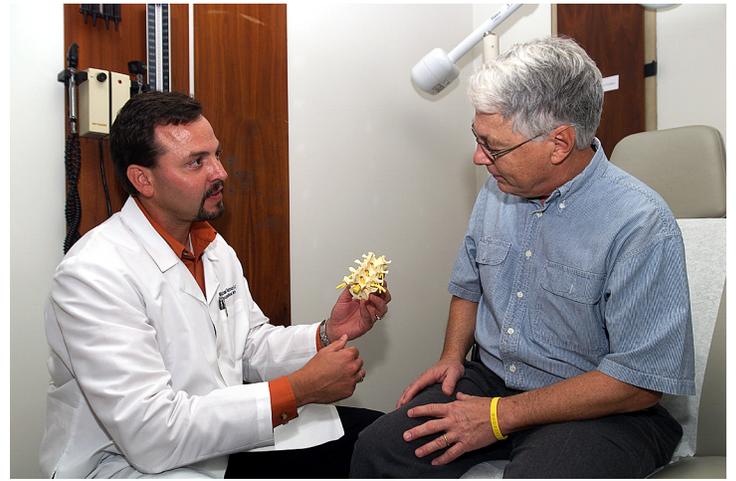
## Key facts

**Fact: Safety for older drivers is a public health issue.**

For those age 65 to 74, motor vehicle injuries are the leading cause of injury-related deaths. Older drivers have a higher fatality rate per miles driven than any other driver age group, except those under the age of 25.

**Fact: There are two reasons for this increased risk.**

1. Drivers 75 years old and older are involved in significantly more motor vehicle crashes per miles driven than middle-aged drivers.
2. Older drivers are considerably more fragile. Fragility begins to increase between ages 60 to 64, and increases steadily with advancing years. By age 80, male and female drivers are, respectively, four and three times more likely than 20-year-olds to die as a result of a motor vehicle crash.



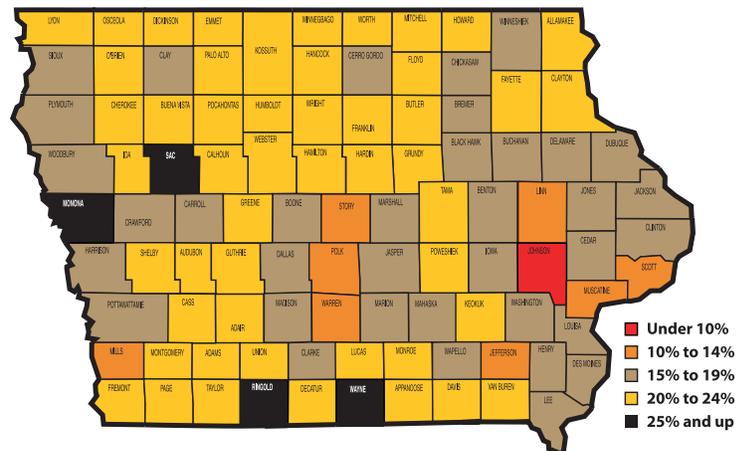
In Iowa, drivers age 65 and older account for 17 percent of all drivers but were involved in 24 percent of all crashes and 26 percent of all fatal crashes.

**Fact: Iowa's increasingly older population is particularly at risk.**

Iowa older driver fatality rates mirror the national picture of risk that rises with aging. At the same time, Iowa's population is growing older.

In four of Iowa's counties more than 25 percent of licensed drivers are age 65 or older (represented in black on map). In 54 of the state's 99 counties, 20 percent or more licensed drivers are age 65 or older (represented in gold on map).

Percent of Iowa Drivers 65 and Older by County



A 30 percent increase in the number of lowans over the age of 65 is expected by the year 2020. Iowa ranks 4th in the nation in percentage of population over the age of 65, and is second only to Florida in percentage of licensed drivers over age 85.

**Fact: Although many older drivers self-regulate their driving behavior, this is not enough to keep crash rates down.**

Older adults cite driving as their usual and preferred mode of transportation, providing them continued mobility and independence.

Around age 50, drivers may begin to feel limited by vision changes, slower reaction times, chronic health problems or side effects from medications. By age 70 or older, many reduce their mileage or stop driving altogether because they feel unsafe or lose their confidence.

Older drivers are more likely to wear safety belts and are less likely to drive at night, speed, tailgate, consume alcohol prior to driving or engage in other risky behaviors. Despite all these self-regulating measures, the crash rate per miles driven begins to increase at age 65.



In a series of focus groups conducted with older adults who had stopped driving within the past five years, 40 percent of the participants knew someone over the age of 65 who had problems with his or her driving, but was still behind the wheel.

**Fact: The crash rate for older drivers is related to physical and mental changes associated with aging.**

Compared with younger drivers, whose vehicle crashes are often due to inexperience or risky behaviors, older driver crashes tend to be related to inattention or slowed perception and response.

Older driver crashes are often multiple-vehicle events that occur at intersections and involve left-hand turns. The crash is usually caused by the older driver's failure to heed signs and yield the right-of-way. At intersections with traffic signals, left-hand turns are a particular problem for the older driver; at stop-sign-controlled intersections, older drivers may not know when to resume driving.

**Fact: Roadway enhancements that assist older drivers are helpful to all drivers.**

Since light sensitivity and decreased acuity of vision are often the first physical aging aspects to affect older drivers, brighter pavement markings and larger or brighter signs can help improve driver reaction times. Intersection design, adjusted signal timing, protected left-turn signals, and other strategies may help reduce crashes at high-speeds or complicated intersections where older drivers are especially at risk.

Shoulder rumble strips, off-set turn lanes, raised medians, raised pavement markers, and other roadway enhancements also help older drivers.

Special solutions may be helpful where older drivers would particularly benefit from specific enhancements, such as at a busy intersection near senior housing.



**Fact: Well-informed adults will make safer decisions about their driving and driving retirement.**

Although most older drivers believe they should be the ones to make the final decision about driving, they also agree they are more likely to accept a physician's advice than that of their spouse or other family member. In a series of focus groups conducted with older adults who had retired from driving within the last five years, all agreed that the physician should talk to older adults about driving, if there is a need. As one panelist stated, "when the doctor says you can't drive anymore, that's definite. But when you decide for yourself, there might be questions."

While family advice alone had limited influence on the participants, most agreed that if their physician advised them to stop, and their family concurred, then they would certainly stop.

**"In some cases, decline for example, in the form of peripheral vision loss - may occur so gradually that the driver is not aware of it until he/she experiences a motor vehicle crash. In the case of dementia, drivers may lack the insight to realize they are unsafe to drive. Clearly, some older drivers require outside assessment and intervention when it comes to driving safety."**

***AMA Physician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers***

**Fact: Driver self-testing tools, family, friends, licensing staff, and physicians can help individuals maintain safe driving skills. They can also influence a driver's decision to modify or retire from driving.**

Everyone can be more aware of how aging affects driving and the actions responsible adults can take to choose safe options or help others with decisions. This brochure is one in a series of Choices Not Chances materials providing a range of tools to raise driver-safety awareness and to help keep older Iowans driving safely.

Drivers can tune up their own skills with a review of signs, rules of the road, driving tips, and driving situations. The Iowa DOT's Office of Driver Services provides a free Senior Driver's Workbook. Refresher classes are available locally through AARP or community college programs. There is no test to pass and drivers enjoy learning simple tips and ways to improve their driving, while sharing their experience with other drivers.

Family members can help a driver by encouraging the driver to maintain his or her health and skills with regular medical checkups, proper diet and exercise. When there are concerns, this Choice Not Chances series may help drivers and families discuss and address safe driving decisions.

Licensing staff can help drivers identify ways they can improve or adjust their driving, maintain their license, and continue to drive safer and longer within their limits. Driver's License Renewal in Iowa explains Iowa licensing procedures. DOT examiners are also available to present the Choices Not Chances video to groups interested in raising safe driving awareness or learning more about driving and aging.

Physicians and other medical professionals can help drivers identify the medical conditions that may affect their driving. They can also suggest vision correction, medication change, limbering-up exercises or other ways to improve driving safety.

Driving With Diminished Skills explains normal changes with aging and describes early indications of dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

Area agencies on aging staff and local public transit services staff can help retiring drivers plan for their transportation needs. Driving Retirement - Planning and Making It Work explains options and provides worksheets for drivers and families to use in planning safe mobility.



**Fact: You can help drivers make safer choices and avoid taking chances.**

Whether you are an aging driver or are concerned about the safety of another driver, these steps can be helpful.

- Be aware of diminished driving capacity and watch for changes in driving capacity from age, medical conditions or medications.
- Assess driving-related functional abilities in yourself or others who may be at risk. Ask someone to ride along, take the Senior Driver's Workbook quiz or attend a driver improvement course.
- Take action to improve driving attention and skills or treat underlying medical causes of functional decline.
- Get help for drivers who require further evaluation and/or adaptive training with a driver rehabilitation specialist.
- Counsel drivers on safe driving behavior, driving restrictions, driving retirement and/or alternative transportation options as needed.
- Follow up with drivers who retire from driving, watching for signs of depression and social isolation.



This booklet is part of the Iowa Department of Transportation's **"Choices Not Chances - The Road to Driving Safer and Longer"** series. These booklets and video were developed to help Iowa drivers remain safe and mobile as they age. For more information, contact the Department of Transportation's Office of Driver Services at 515-244-8725.

