

Driving and Dementia

Can people with dementia drive?

Many people with dementia are able to continue driving for some time following diagnosis. Driving can be part of maintaining independence and an active life.

Most people in the early stages of dementia are physically capable of controlling a car. The basic skills of driving become almost automatic to most drivers, and people with dementia will keep these skills for a considerable time after diagnosis.

British law assumes, as its starting point, that they have a right to drive. The law only intervenes when medical conditions impair driving ability. The legal position is that a driver has to be able to drive on his or her own, without help from anyone else.

However, people with dementia may be slower to react, or make decisions, particularly when under stress. Research shows that people with dementia are more likely to be involved in accidents than other people.

What must I do about driving now I know I have dementia?

1. Inform the DVLA

If you have a driving licence, you must tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) that you have a diagnosis of dementia. If you don't, you are breaking the law and you can be fined up to £1,000 and your insurance may not cover you if you drive.

If you want to carry on driving, tell the DVLA. They will send you a questionnaire

and will get reports from your doctor. They may need you to have a driving assessment. The Medical Advisers at DVLA will take the final decision on your suitability to drive, based on the information they receive. They may decide that you are safe to drive a car but not a heavy goods vehicle or a passenger vehicle.

If at any time you decide you shouldn't carry on driving, send your licence back to the DVLA.

2. Tell your insurance company

You must tell your insurance company about your diagnosis straight away, as it is a criminal offence to drive without third party insurance cover

3. Check with your doctor

Ask your GP or specialist about whether you can still drive safely. If the doctor is not sure, he or she may refer you for a driving assessment.

4. Take sensible steps to reduce risk

Avoid difficult driving conditions, like busy traffic, fast roads or long, tiring trips. Stick to routes you know well, as much as possible. Give yourself plenty of time – don't go out in a rush.

Some medication can affect your driving, for example by making you drowsy. Make sure you don't drive if you feel tired. Check with your GP if you are not sure about the effects of any medicines you are on.

5. If you drive in your job, tell your employer

If you are still working, and your job involves driving, you must tell your employer.

How can I tell if I'm still safe to drive?

Knowing when to stop driving

You may find that you are feeling less confident, or that you scare yourself with a near miss while driving. Or you might feel very confused when something changes, like a diversion on a familiar route.

But it isn't always easy to know yourself if you are still safe. Ask the people around you to find out if they have any concerns.

The Driving Assessment Service

If you have any concerns about whether you are safe to drive, but you want to continue, ask your GP to refer you to the Scottish Driving Assessment Service (SDAS). The service is part of the NHS and is free.

The SDAS aims to find a fair balance between promoting independence and assessing risk. They will give you and your relatives an opinion based on an analysis of how your dementia is affecting your driving and how you perform during the driving assessment.

The SDAS tries to enable people to continue driving and maintain independence for as long as possible. About 70% of all the people they assess, including people with physical disabilities, can go on driving. However, they can also help people to cope with having to stop driving.

The SDAS will report back to the doctor who referred you, and will also put any recommendation in writing to you. They will advise you on what to do next. If the DVLA allow you to continue driving, they usually issue a one year licence. This means you are legally allowed to drive and you should be able to obtain insurance cover, although you may have to pay higher premiums. At the end of a year (sometimes longer) you can reapply and be reviewed.

If they don't think you are safe to drive, the Centre will explain why.

What can I do if I'm worried about someone else's driving?

Discuss it

If you are not sure if the person is safe to drive it is important to discuss it with them – they may share your concern.

The person may be willing to give up driving once the problem is pointed out. Discuss alternative transport options to help them to stay as independent as possible.

Sometimes, however, someone with dementia can't see that there is a problem. In this case, you may need to take action yourself by contacting the DVLA.

How the DVLA can help

If someone with dementia will not inform the DVLA him or herself, you can do it by contacting the DVLA Drivers' Medical Group. GPs and other health professionals can also contact the DVLA, but they will only do this if their patient does not take their advice. The DVLA are happy to discuss the situation with family members by telephone, although they need a request in writing in order to take action.

The DVLA will treat the information sensitively and in confidence, they will not tell the driver who contacted them. The DVLA will send the person with dementia what appears to be a routine, unsolicited letter and a form to complete. The form asks if there is anything they would like to inform the DVLA about, and includes (among other things) a question relating to memory and dementia.

The form also seeks permission to access the person's medical records. This form must be completed by law. Failure to do so will not prevent the DVLA from accessing the person's medical records.

If the situation is urgent

The DVLA takes about three months to deal with enquiries, because of the volume of enquiries and due to the need to investigate each individual case. This waiting time can be difficult if the person with dementia is clearly unsafe to drive.

Try to persuade the person not to drive, however, not everyone is able to recognise when they are no longer safe to drive. Sometimes, if the person refuses to stop, relatives and friends who are seriously concerned about safety try temporary strategies, such as 'losing' the car keys or putting the car in for repair.

How will I manage if I can't drive?

Coping with losing your licence

Giving up driving can be difficult. If you have been a car user for a long time, you probably rely on it for all sorts of day-to-day practicalities. Losing your car can be life changing.

There can be a positive side to being without a car, for example saving money on insurance and petrol. Being without a car is better for a person's health and for the environment.

Some people feel self-conscious about having to stop driving because of dementia, but remember, it's a medical condition like any other. Many people have to give up driving, especially as they get older, for medical reasons, so you're not alone.

If your job involves driving

If you are still working and you drive as part of your job, talk to your employer. Some employers will do their best to help. Perhaps they can change the work you do so that you don't need to drive. Unfortunately, however, this may not always be possible, and you may have to retire early on medical grounds.

Shopping

Many people rely on the car for practical chores like supermarket shopping. Talk with your family and friends to work out how they can help. Alternatively, you can have your shopping brought to your door by ordering online or having it delivered by the supermarket. If you order online you can set

up a regular shopping list which can help you remember what to buy.

Free bus travel

The Scottish Government provides free or subsidised bus and train travel to older (60+) and disabled people across Scotland – proof of age or disability is required.

The scheme allows for free bus travel throughout Scotland and across the border to Berwick-upon-Tweed and Carlisle. It also gives those based in Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles four free return journeys to the mainland per year.

Cheaper train travel

You can get cheaper train travel with a Railcard. They give you 1/3 off most journeys for a year.

Disabled Railcard

This gives you plus someone travelling with you 1/3 off. To qualify you must have one of a list of disabilities or be getting Attendance Allowance or the higher or middle rate of Disability Living Allowance.

Senior Railcard

This gives you 1/3 off most train fares. To qualify you must be over 60 and provide proof of age.

In some areas, a concession pass will get you cheaper travel on trains, as well as free bus travel.

Helpcard

Alzheimer Scotland has a card for people with dementia to use to help people who serve the public to understand their needs. You can show this to transport staff as well as in shops, etc.

Taxi card schemes

Ask your local council if it has a taxi transport scheme. Some councils provide cheaper taxi travel or a certain number of free or cheap taxi journeys a month to disabled people, including people with dementia.

Useful contacts

DVLA Drivers' Medical Group

DVLA
Swansea
SA99 1TU
0300 790 6806

Scottish Driving Assessment Service

SMART Centre
Astley Ainslie Hospital
133 Grange Loan
Edinburgh EH9 2HL
0131 537 9192

Transport Scotland

Buchanan House
58 Port Dundas Road
Glasgow
G4 0HF
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