



Driving and dementia

Introduction

This information sheet is for people with dementia, and their families and friends. It will help you to consider whether continuing to drive is the right choice. If you have dementia and you want to carry on driving, this information sheet will tell you what you must do to make sure you are driving legally. It will also help families and friends who are worried about whether someone with dementia should still be driving.

Can people with dementia drive?

The short answer is maybe. Many people with dementia are able to continue driving for some time following diagnosis.

People with a diagnosis of dementia often want to continue driving. 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 you 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. The aim is to allow people to continue to drive if possible.

However, dementia affects reaction speed and decision-making. People with dementia may be slower to react, especially under stress. For example, they may have problems in busy traffic, or when something unexpected happens, such as another car stopping suddenly. Research shows that people with dementia are more likely to be involved in accidents than other people.

So: you may be able to carry on driving, but it is important to make sure you are still safe to drive.

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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 Authority (DVLA) if you have a diagnosis of dementia. If you don't, you are breaking the law and you can be fined up to £1,000. If you have not told the DVLA about your diagnosis your insurance may not cover you if you drive. The DVLA's address and telephone number are at the end of this information sheet.

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 (see *The Driving Assessment Service* on page 2) for more information about this.)

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 of your diagnosis straight away. If you don't and you have an accident they may not pay up, even if the accident was not your fault. 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 (see *The Driving Assessment Service* on page 2).

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 should tell your employer.

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

Knowing when to stop driving

Sometimes it is obvious that driving is no longer a good idea. You may find that you are feeling less confident, or that you scare yourself with a near miss. 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. Check with people around you to find out if they have any concerns.

The Driving Assessment Service

If you or your friends and relatives have any concerns at all 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 is based in Edinburgh and they have a mobile service for other parts of Scotland. Their staff will assess your driving carefully.

They will usually:

- give you a physical assessment
- use a 'test rig', which will measure your reaction time compared to other people's
- assess you in a car as much like the one you normally drive as possible, with dual braking for safety
- observe you driving in hospital grounds before going out with you into traffic.

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 80% 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 will probably 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 you can reapply and be reviewed. Sometimes they issue a license for longer than this.

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. It may be that the person is also concerned. If he or she wants to continue driving, See *The Driving Assessment Service* on page 2 for how he or she can be assessed.

The person may be willing to give up driving once the problem is pointed out. Discuss alternative transport options to help him or her stay as independent as possible – see *How will I manage if I can't drive?* on page 4.

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. Contact the DVLA Drivers' Medical Group (see *Useful contacts* on page 5). 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, both because of the volume of enquiries and due to the need to investigate each individual case (they get malicious as well as honest calls). This waiting time can be very difficult if the person with dementia is clearly unsafe to drive.

Try to persuade the person not to drive. Perhaps you or someone else can volunteer to do the driving instead. Unfortunately, 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 a difficult step to take. 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 a real blow. Your life will have to change.

But many people don't own cars, and there can be a positive side to being without one. For example, owning a car is expensive when you count the cost of the car, tax, insurance, maintenance and petrol. Car owners often admit they use the car even for very short journeys, when walking would be better for their health and for the environment. And if you don't have a car, at least you don't have to worry about all the things that could go wrong with it.

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. For example, some people can't drive because of cataracts or epilepsy. 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 especially rely on the car for practical chores like supermarket shopping. Talk with your family and friends to work out the best solution for you. Perhaps you can get a regular lift when a friend or neighbour does their shopping. Or perhaps you can get your shopping brought to your door. Some supermarkets will deliver, although there may be a charge. In some supermarkets you can do the shopping yourself and then they deliver

it, and some have internet ordering, which might be useful if you have a computer. If you use the internet you can set up a regular shopping list which can help you remember what to buy.

Free bus travel

Most people with dementia will be able to get free local bus travel at off-peak times. The Scottish Executive says that every local council must provide free off-peak bus travel to people who are over 60 or are disabled.

- If you are 60 or over you will definitely qualify.
- If you are under 60, you might qualify – some local authorities include people with dementia and some don't, and you might have to be getting Disability Living Allowance.

Ask your local council about how to get a bus pass or a concession pass.

Some councils provide more than just free off-peak bus travel. In some areas you will be able to travel on local trains or ferries too. Alzheimer Scotland has local service guides for people with dementia which give specific information about local arrangements. Call the Dementia Helpline (0808 808 3000) or see www.alzscot.org to see if there is a guide for your area.

In the future, the Scottish Executive plan to extend the scheme to include off-peak bus travel across Scotland as well as local buses.

Cheaper train travel

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

You may qualify for a Disabled Person's Railcard, which gives you plus someone travelling with you 1/3 off. To get this card, you need to have one of a list of disabilities *or* be getting Attendance Allowance or the higher or middle rate of Disability Living Allowance.

Contact the Disabled Person's Railcard office in Newcastle (0191 218 8103) for more information and application form or see www.disabledpersons-railcard.co.uk The card costs £14.

If you are over 60, you can apply for a Senior Railcard, which costs £18 and gives you 1/3 off most train fares. You can apply at any station. Take proof of your age.

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

Thistle Travel Card

The Thistle Travel Card is a special card for people who have difficulty using public transport because of age, disability, illness or simply lack of confidence. If you show this card to transport staff they can give you extra help, such as:

- more time to find a seat
- making sure you are on the right bus or train
- telling you when to get off
- counting out change
- telling you information about your journey instead of giving you a written timetable.

You can put helpful information in a plastic wallet on the back, such as your destination, an emergency contact or anything helpful for transport staff to know.

Thistle Travel Cards are available from transport booking offices, local authority concessionary travel offices, day centres, carers centres or the Dementia Helpline – 0808 808 3000.

Helpcard

Alzheimer Scotland has a card for people with dementia to use to help people who serve the public to understand their special needs. You can show this to transport staff as well as in shops, etc. Call the Dementia Helpline (0808 808 3000) or see

www.alzscot.org//info/helpcard.html to get a free Helpcard.

Taxi card schemes

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

Help from other people

Family and friends may be able to offer lifts. Don't be embarrassed to ask; most people will be happy to help.

Useful contacts

DVLA Drivers' Medical Group

DVLA
Swansea
SA99 1TU
0870 600 0301

Scottish Driving Assessment Service

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

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Dementia **Alzheimer Scotland**
Action on Dementia

Helpline

24 HOUR

Freephone 0808 808 3000

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