

Older and Wiser: When should seniors stop driving? It's a serious question

Getting around is important for seniors, but so is staying safe and avoiding crashes
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Deciding when a senior should stop driving is a serious decision. Are you having more fender benders? Do you get lost easily? If so, it may be time to talk it over. photo Paul McGrath, North Shore News

One of the determinants of health for seniors is good transportation.

Essentially, transportation is crucial for seniors who wish to stay active, independent, and involved in their communities. Decent transportation must be accessible and easy to use.

According to speakers at a public forum on seniors and driving held this fall by the United Way of BC, the main forms of transportation for seniors 65 and older are driving, public transit, taxis, or other accessible transit, and walking or biking. They also say that 78 per cent of seniors in that age range have a driver's licence, while the percentage for younger people who have licences is falling.

There are arguments for ceasing to drive for most of us, including protecting the environment and encouraging a healthier lifestyle. For seniors it may also involve age-related or medical reasons. As you get older, your vision, reflexes, and hearing may change, and these changes can make it harder for you to drive safely.

In the HealthLinkBC report [Healthy Aging: Is it time to stop driving?](#), provincial health authorities say that there is no set time for people to stop driving, but seniors might want to consider that "people aged 70 and older are more likely to crash than any other age group besides drivers aged 25 and

younger. And because older drivers are more fragile, they are more likely to get hurt or die from these crashes.”

At age 80 in British Columbia, seniors are sent a letter telling them that they must undergo a Drivers Medical Examination or give up their licence. Aside from the fact that the exam costs a senior anywhere from \$75 to \$217 (not covered by B.C.'s Medical Services Plan), what makes age 80 the magic number for testing? Drawing an age line in the sand seems discriminatory. I personally have found some 80-year-old drivers quite good, while there are a few 50-year-olds I would not let drive me around the block.

On the bright side, however, according to RoadSafetyBC, they send about 70,000 examination reports a year and 98 per cent of the seniors evaluated keep their driving privileges. Nevertheless, for the 2 per cent that don't, that loss of a licence can result in a loss of independence, feelings of stress and anxiety, and inevitably leads to major lifestyle adjustments.

But what if it is time to “hang up the keys”? The HealthLinkBC publication suggests taking stock of your driving by considering these signs: Do other drivers often honk at you? Are you having car crashes, even if they are only fender benders? Are you having trouble staying in your lane? Do you get lost, even on roads you know?

Other considerations might be that you get more tickets than you used to, you notice more dents in your car, and you are having trouble with hearing or vision. Nighttime driving can be especially difficult if you have issues with glare.

You could modify your driving behaviour if you have minor to moderate issues with driving. To stay safe, perhaps avoid driving at night, on the freeway, or in bad weather. Plan to drive on streets you know. Take roads that let you avoid risky spots such as ramps and left turns. Maybe begin to intersperse using alternative means of transportation including walking, biking, taxis, and ride hailing, asking a family member or friend for a ride, community transportation, and public transport.

Unfortunately, some of these alternatives might pose some difficulties for seniors on the North Shore. Public transit can be difficult if a senior has a form of cognitive delay or mobility issues. As well, there are areas on the rainy North Shore which lack bus service, or there is a lack of covered benches. And need I mention the hilly terrain – that makes it hard to move about if you are a senior with limited mobility.

Although the three North Shore municipalities are urging walkability, it is sometimes a problem getting around. Seniors may find there is not enough covered seating at regular intervals and that there is a shortage of accessible washrooms. Also, seniors may have trouble navigating around sandwich boards, outdoor patios, skateboarders, and bikes on sidewalks.

Often amenities such as shopping, medical facilities, seniors organizations, libraries and recreation centres are not within walking distance of someone's home. Building more town centres might be a solution to that issue.

In the last few years, the community has stepped up to deal with seniors issues around transportation by providing bus and shuttle services, although with COVID that service has been reduced. But check with your nearest seniors centre or organization that provides services to seniors, and they might be able to provide a ride for you. [Silver Harbour](#) and [West Vancouver Seniors' Activity Centre](#) offer a bus service, as does [Capilano Community Services Society](#), the [Parkgate Society](#) and the [North Shore Neighbourhood House](#). Also check out the [Better at Home](#) program through [North Shore Community Resources](#).

Hanging up the keys for good is a serious decision. But getting around safely is crucial.

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