



## ElderCare Q&A

### Testing Older Drivers

#### **Q: Are older drivers in Massachusetts forced to take driver's tests?**

**A:** No, not in Massachusetts. But a recent series of deadly car accidents involving older drivers has sped up efforts to test the ability of older drivers to safely operate a vehicle.

"These accidents highlight the need for some sort of action," one state Senator recently admitted. "Some want no testing, others want more. Our job is to balance the demands of the advocacy groups with the interests of public safety. We need to come up with something that will work." Legislation has been filed on Beacon Hill that would require drivers 85 or older to pass road and vision tests to get their licenses renewed.

According to AARP, older people are relatively safe drivers. Persons age 65 and older have lower rates of crashes and crashes involving injury per licensed driver than younger drivers. Seniors have the lowest percentage of crashes involving alcohol, and the highest rate of seatbelt use of any age group. The AARP says increased incidence of fatal crashes involving drivers age 75 and older is due to the increased fragility of older drivers and their passengers, which makes them more likely to be killed or injured in a crash.

Older drivers are not over-involved in crashes in which pedestrians, cyclists, or drivers and passengers in other vehicles are killed. A spokesman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety notes, "Despite the high-profile crashes that get a lot of media attention, there is almost no basis for singling out elderly drivers as being a menace to others out on the highway."

The Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles supports studying the older driver issue. "We need to look at all the research and see where we're going with this," an RMV spokesman said. But the RMV noted that "age-based" legislation is not the best solution, preferring medical decisions as the criteria to use. In some states, doctors are legally mandated to report impaired drivers---who can be of any age. The RMV gets reports from family members and the police about drivers who are considered at risk. The RMV says it has reviewed the medical records of 8,000 drivers, and 3,000 of those have voluntarily given up their licenses.

It's a big deal to give up a license. As Dr. Byron Thames, an AARP Board member, testified in 2004: "As a family doctor, I can tell you first hand what happens when seniors lose their independence and are stranded without adequate transportation options. It's not just a matter of a little inconvenience. They become sedentary and isolated, and it sucks the life right out of them - literally and figuratively."

But the pressure to do something is rising, because by 2025, one in four drivers will be over the age of 65. Governor Deval Patrick wants to make testing of drivers 85 and older mandatory every five years. New Hampshire requires road testing for drivers 75 and over. Legislation has also been filed to require doctors to alert the Registry of Motor Vehicles to cognitive and physical impairments that affect their patients' ability to drive-regardless of their age.

Elder rights groups say legislation is only part of a much larger solution, which includes redesigning roadways to be easier to use by disabled individuals of any age, and improving our public transportation services so seniors are not left isolated in their homes after giving up a license.

The American Automobile Association Foundation offers "Drivers 55 Plus," a tool that allows drivers to assess their own performance. It provides specific safety suggestions based on the driver's answers to 15 questions. The AAA also has created the "AAA Roadwise Review," a computer-based self-assessment tool that measures the eight functional abilities shown to be the strongest predictors of accident risk among senior drivers.

For more information on older drivers, go to [AAAseniors.com](http://AAAseniors.com).