Driving Mr. and Ms. Daisy

As the U.S. population ages, senior motorists become a growing concern.

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An increasing number of drivers are age 70 and older, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and the Highway Loss Data Institute. Many are aging baby boomers who are keeping their licenses longer. But along with aging come impairments that may affect an individual's ability to operate motor vehicles.

Findings show that health issues are the primary cause of higher crash rates among older drivers. As folks age, their vision, memory and attention tend to decline. What's more their motor function may fall victim to the painful effects of arthritis on joints and muscles, which can make it difficult to turn a steering wheel quickly, brake safely or look backward when necessary.

In addition, many elderly motorists use medications that can interfere with their ability to drive, according to results from the American Automobile Association (AAA) Longitudinal Research on Aging Drivers. Scientists designed this major study to gather information on the medical, behavioral, environmental and technological factors that influence older adults' driving.

Data collected from sites in five different U.S. cities found that elderly motorists commonly used medications that can impair driving ability and boost the risk of crashes, side effects that were known to less than one third of seniors.

Other investigations focused on drivers living with dementia, a condition that diminishes cognitive abilities, which occurs in almost 5 million people older than age 65. Ultimately, the illness necessitates that affected individuals stop driving. This is because "at some point in the progression of the disease, driving performance errors will present a safety risk to both the individual and the public," explain experts from the Alzheimer's Association (AA).

According to AAA research, drivers suffering from dementia may get lost while traveling, turn and signal incorrectly, change lanes improperly and suffer from reduced understanding of traffic signs and patterns.

But although the AA believes that driving privileges must be revoked when individuals pose a serious risk to themselves or others, the group contends that on its own a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is never sufficient reason to confiscate someone's car keys.

Instead, the AA suggests that families plan for when loved ones may no longer be able to drive and include them in the decision-making process.

Additionally, insurers have teamed with state and local governments and other groups, such as the American Association of Retired Persons and AAA, to develop programs to address these issues, reports the Insurance Information Institute.

Now, many states try to assess and regulate older drivers' operation of motor vehicles. For instance, rules require that individuals renew their licenses more frequently, retake road tests and provide confirmation from doctors that folks are capable of driving safely.

The national transportation research group TRIP reports that 90 percent of older folks travel via private vehicles, and 80 percent live in suburban and rural areas that require that they drive.

These are some reasons why developments in self-driving autos and connected vehicles (for example, cars, buses, trucks and trains that can communicate with smartphones and other devices) are so highly anticipated, suggests TRIP.

Undoubtedly, these conveyances will help countless elderly men and women stay independent and mobile longer, great benefits for both seniors and their loved ones.

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