Aging and Driving

Texas Department of Insurance
Division of Workers' Compensation
Workplace & Medical Services, Outreach & Education

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Goal

This program will provide information on different aspects of aging and driving.

Objectives

After completing this Safety Training Program, the participant will be able to list the following:

- statistics about drivers;
- common violations committed by drivers by age category;
- the physical changes occurring in the aging driver;
- tips to help aging drivers maintain safe driving records; and
- precautions associated with taking medications.

Background

As we age, there are numerous aspects of life that begin to change, one of which is our ability to drive safely. This does not mean we should stop driving; however, there are things we need to know to make our driving safer. We will look at these various aspects and see how they work together to make driving a safer experience for the aging driver.

Traffic Violations Common to Aging Drivers

The types of traffic violations committed differ among the different age groups of drivers. People in the 55 or older age group tend to commit the following violations:

- failure to yield right-of-way;
- improper turns;
- improper lane changes; and
- improper entering/leaving freeway.

Drivers in younger age groups commit different traffic violations.

The most frequently committed violations of younger drivers include:

- driving under the influence;
- reckless driving;
- speeding; and
- tailgating.

Physiological Changes That Affect Driving

Vision

By age 50, the eye is able to "see" only half as much light as at age 20. This means that, as we age, it becomes increasingly difficult to see well at night. Cataracts often occur during aging. Cataracts scatter the vision in the eyeball and can create a veiling glare, which hampers vision. The loss of focusing ability during aging also causes people to hold things farther away so they can see them. Another problem that may occur with age is macular degeneration, a decrease of central vision. The onset of glaucoma can cause the loss of peripheral and up-and-down vision and can cause tunnel vision. Spots or floaters in the eye can cause vision to become clouded.

Hearing

As we age, hearing can deteriorate. Older people may have difficulty hearing high frequencies. Frequent hearing checks by an audiologist can help diagnose hearing problems.

Physical Strength and Bone Mass

Other changes that could affect a driver's ability to drive safely are changes in strength and bone mass. Men lose half of their physical strength by age 60. Women lose half of their bone mass by age 70 thus making them more susceptible to injury.

Safe Driving Tips For the Aging Driver

Older drivers should use the following tips to make their driving experience safer:

- Have more frequent eye exams to keep up with changes in vision.
- Have more frequent audiological exams to keep up with changes in hearing.
- Increase the distance between their vehicle and the vehicle in front of them.
- Avoid looking at oncoming lights at night.
- Keep windshields and lights clean for better visibility.
- Use car mirrors more often to maintain traffic awareness.
- Avoid fatigue on long trips by taking a break at least every 100 miles.
- Avoid driving at dusk and during rush hour.
- Avoid smoking.
- Always wear a seat belt, even if the car is equipped with an airbag. Seat belts can double your chances of surviving a serious crash.

- When purchasing an automobile, older drivers should con sider that:
- lighter-colored cars can be seen two to four times better at a distance; and
- larger cars tend to be more comfortable and safer.

Medications

Statistics show that persons over age 55 take an average of seven medications per day. This includes both over-the-counter and prescription medications. Drivers should be aware of the effects that medications can have on their driving. They should talk to a doctor, pharmacist, or health care professional to make sure they know any potential side effects of medications. This is the first step to ensuring medications do not impair driving ability. Above all, drivers should avoid using alcohol when taking medications. Alcohol can enhance or lessen the effects of the medicine and cause other side effects. All drivers, regardless of age, should avoid using alcohol when operating any type of vehicle. Never drink and drive!

Review Questions

1. Which is more visible from a distance?
   a) a lighter color car
   b) a darker color car

2. When medication and alcoholic beverages are combined, what is the usual effect?
   a) alcohol can enhance or lessen the effects of the medication
   b) alcohol triples the effects of the medication
   c) there is no effect

3. What type of violation is an older person more likely to commit?
   a) moving violation (failure to yield right-of-way, improper turn, etc.)
   b) speeding
   c) drunk driving

4. Your chances of surviving a serious crash are ___ when wearing a safety belt.
   a) not changed
   b) decreased
   c) doubled

Answers:

1. a
2. a
3. a
4. c

Resources

The Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers' Compensation (TDI/DWC) Resource Center offers a workers' health and safety video tape library. Call (512) 804-4620 for more information or visit our web site at www.tdi.state.tx.us.

Disclaimer: Information contained in this training program is considered accurate at time of publication.