Aging and Driving

Goal
Provide information about aspects of aging and driving.

Objective
For employers to understand:
- common traffic violations among older drivers,
- physical changes that occur as people age and how they affect driving, and
- how to help aging drivers stay safe on the road.

Background
Many aspects of life can change as people age, including skills that affect driving. This does not necessarily mean older employees should stop driving, but rather that employers should follow recommended strategies for keeping older employees and their fellow motorists safe on the road – and that older drivers should heed recommendations for making driving safer.

Traffic Violations Common among Aging Drivers
Types of common traffic violations differ among age groups. People 55 or older, a growing group of the driving U.S. population, tend to commit the following violations:
- failing to yield the right of way,
- making improper turns,
- making improper lane changes, and
- improperly entering or exiting freeways.

By comparison, drivers in younger age groups typically commit different traffic violations, including:
- driving under the influence,
- driving recklessly,
- speeding, and
- tailgating.

Physiological Changes That Affect Driving

Vision
- **Seeing less light.** Older eyes may need more light and time to adjust when light changes. This means that as we age, it becomes harder to see well when driving at night, dusk, or dawn.
- **Cataracts.** People with cataracts are especially sensitive to glare because bright light, like car headlights, streetlights, or the sun, scatters in the eye’s lenses and makes it harder to read signs and see colors.
- **Less focus.** Older drivers may have trouble focusing or switching focus from near to far objects.
- **Age-related macular degeneration.** This condition damages the macula, a small spot near the center of the retina that is needed for sharp central vision.
- **The onset of glaucoma.** This group of diseases that damage the optic nerve can cause loss of side-to-side (peripheral) and up-and-down vision, lead to tunnel vision, and ultimately cause blindness.
- **Spots or floaters in the eye.** As people age, condensation can form in the eye, clouding vision.

Hearing
- **Difficulty hearing higher frequencies.** Age-related hearing loss can make it harder to hear horns, sirens, and other sounds that can warn of dangers on the road.

Motor Skills
- **Physical strength and bone mass.** Men can lose half of their physical strength by age 60, while women can lose half their bone mass by age 70. This fragility may make some driving tasks more difficult, like pressing down on a brake pedal and may make older people prone to injury or death in a crash.
• Range of motion, flexibility, and coordination. Stiff joints, muscle weakness, or other physical changes can affect these abilities, which are key for executing safe driving movements such as fastening a seat belt, looking around at different angles at vehicles or other objects, steering, or parking.

Mental Ability

• Decline in memory, attention span, and judgment can lead to aging drivers’ feeling overwhelmed and unable to react quickly and safely enough to the signs and obstacles around them.

Safe Driving Tips for Aging Employees

Older drivers should follow these tips to make their driving experiences safer:

• Maintain good physical health by exercising regularly to increase strength and flexibility, eating a balanced diet, and getting seven to nine hours of sleep each day.
• Speak with your doctor about how any medical conditions you have may affect your driving.
• Have a thorough eye exam at least every one to two years to monitor changes in vision. Wear and replace corrective lenses as prescribed by your doctor.
• Have frequent audiological exams to keep up with changes in hearing.
• Speak with your doctor or pharmacist about your prescription or over-the-counter medications’ interactions and potential effects on driving. Be sure to read and follow medicines’ warning labels.
• Use a driving self-assessment tool to evaluate your driving, and take a driving refresher course.
• Plan routes before getting on the road. Find the safest routes with well-lighted streets, intersections with left-turn arrows, and easy parking at destinations.
• Drive during daylight and in good weather.
• Avoid driving during rush hour.
• Increase following distance between your vehicle and the vehicle ahead.
• At night, avoid looking into oncoming lights.
• Consider buying a lighter-colored car, which is more visible from a distance.
• Adjust your seat, seat belt, and head restraint so that it fits properly. Be sure to have at least 10 inches between your chest and the steering wheel and that a clear sight line over the wheel, and that you can reach all pedals.
• Don’t drive if you feel drowsy or lightheaded.
• Know your limitations. If you are having difficulty driving for work, speak with your supervisor about possible solutions, including telecommuting or a flexible schedule to avoid high traffic times.
• Consider alternatives to driving, such as taking public transit or riding with a friend.

Tips for Avoiding Common Driving Mistakes

To avoid crashes resulting from the common traffic violations, drivers should:

• Remember, in every situation, right-of-way is something given, not taken.
• Obey signs and signals at controlled intersections.
• Always use directional signals at least 100 feet before turning, merging, or changing lanes.
• At intersections where no traffic signs or signals indicate the right of way, yield to drivers on multi-lane or paved roads if you are traveling on an unpaved or single/two-lane road. If all intersecting roads are the same, yield right-of-way to any vehicle approaching on the right.
• When turning left, always yield to vehicles coming from the opposite direction.
• Look both ways before turning onto a roadway from a driveway or parking lot. Be cautious – if you cannot tell how fast a vehicle is approaching, let it pass before entering the roadway.
• When traveling on a frontage road, yield to motorists exiting from the highway and those entering the highway from the frontage road.
• On a road with three or more lanes of traffic moving in the same direction, yield to motorists making lane changes from the left.
• Accelerate confidently when entering a highway and slow down when exiting a highway.
• Use car mirrors to stay aware of traffic conditions. Adjust side mirrors to monitor your vehicle’s blind spots before merging or changing lanes.
• Keep windshields and lights clean for better visibility.
• Pay attention to traffic and roadway signs, or ask a passenger to help you.
• Drive defensively by frequently scanning traffic and obstacles around you.
Tips for Employers to Promote Safe Driving

In addition to incorporating the above tips in their driver training programs, employers should create and enforce comprehensive driver safety policies applicable to all drivers that:

- require all vehicle occupants to always wear seat belts;
- ban use of cell phones for calling or texting while driving; as of September 1, 2017, it is illegal in Texas to text and drive, except in certain circumstances;
- consider reducing the overall amount of driving required;
- establish driver qualifications;
- restrict work-related driving based on a driving assessment rather than an age limit;
- allow for job duty reassignment that doesn’t require driving when an employee’s ability to drive is temporarily or permanently affected;
- provide training on the types of vehicles employees will be operating and working near;
- train employees on how to use advanced safety features in their vehicles and how to adjust seats, head restraints, and other features;
- encourage pre-planning routes, destinations, and schedules before driving;
- allow for changes to driving hours so employees can avoid driving at night, if they are too tired, or if road or weather conditions are poor;
- ban operating a vehicle while under the influence of illegal drugs, alcohol, or any prescription or over-the-counter medications that affect driving skills;
- promote a positive work environment that reduces stress and improves sleep quality; and
- support employees’ overall health and safety through workplace programs that encourage good exercise, diet, and sleep habits.

Review Questions

1. Which is a physiological change that can occur in older drivers?
   a. Difficulty hearing higher frequencies
   b. Decrease in range of motion
   c. Decline in reaction time
   d. All of the above

2. Which choice of vehicle is more visible from a distance?
   a. A lighter-colored car
   b. A darker-colored car

3. When should directional signals be used?
   a. When turning left into oncoming traffic
   b. When changing lanes on a multi-lane roadway
   c. When merging on to a highway
   d. All of the above

4. What type of violation is an older driver more likely to commit?
   a. Moving violation (such as failing to yield right of way or turning improperly)
   b. Speeding
   c. Drunk driving

5. Who has the right of way?
   a. Motorists changing lanes from the left on a multi-lane roadway
   b. Motorists traveling on the frontage road of a controlled access highway
   c. Motorists on an unpaved, one-lane road

6. Which is not a recommended part of an employer’s comprehensive driver safety policy?
   a. Banning use of cell phones for calling or texting while driving
   b. Providing refresher driver training
   c. Only allowing company vehicles to be used for work
   d. Allowing adjustments to driving hours

7. Which is a safe-driving tip recommended for employees?
   a. Avoid driving during rush hour
   b. Plan the safest routes before getting on the road
   c. Speak with your doctor about medical conditions that may affect your driving
   d. All of the above

Answers

1. d
2. a
3. d
4. a
5. c
6. c
7. d

This document was produced by the Division of Workers’ Compensation (DWC) and is considered accurate at the time of publication. Some information provided by the National Safety Council.

For more free DWC publications on this and other safety topics and for free occupational safety and health audiovisual loans, visit the TDI website at www.txsgetyatwork.com, call (800) 252-7031, option 2, or email resourcecenter@tdi.texas.gov.