

## Am I still fit to drive?

# Aging and safe driving

There's a great deal of misinformation around about older drivers. When compared to drivers in younger age groups, older drivers are usually more cautious, more experienced and more responsible. They are more likely to obey the law and are less likely to drink drive or speed.

### Keeping yourself and others safe

Older drivers are more vulnerable to being injured or killed in a car crash. This is because our bodies become frailer as we age and less able to withstand the physical impact of a crash. In addition, some health conditions and physical changes are more common with aging and can have an impact on our driving ability.

Being alert to the health and related conditions that might affect our ability to drive safely is our best protection, and the best protection for other people on the road.

All drivers, no matter what age, should routinely consider 'am I still fit to drive?'



Many of us drive every day without thinking about the risks that come with being behind the wheel. All of us need to make sure we are fit to drive, or we risk harming ourselves and others.

If you have any serious or chronic medical conditions, injuries or disabilities (or the effects of treatment for any of those things), you must:

- talk to a doctor about how it might affect your driving
- contact VicRoads to report your condition
- send VicRoads a medical report from a doctor who knows your medical history.

## Adapting to physical and mental change

Getting older or having medical conditions doesn't mean you have to stop driving.

In Victoria, drivers are not required to pass a licence test when they reach a particular age. Retaining your driver licence is determined by your behaviour and medical fitness to drive. Driving is a privilege for everyone, which brings with it responsibilities.

There are some changes that happen with age that affect your ability to drive safely.

These changes can be physical or changes to memory and thinking. They include:

- changes to your eyesight
- changes to your memory
- hearing loss
- your ability to make decisions or react quickly when driving
- increased use of medications
- reduced mobility caused by stiffness, pain or weakness.

Often these changes happen very slowly. It is important to know what they are so you can assess how they might affect your ability to drive. This factsheet outlines steps you can take to continue to drive safely.

## SARAH'S STORY

At her regular eye check, Sarah was talking to her optometrist about headlight glare while driving at night. Her optometrist said it was typical for night vision to deteriorate gradually from around the age of 40 onwards. She checked Sarah's eyes for any sign of cataracts, which can increase sensitivity to glare and bright lights, and did a full vision test.

After ruling out any major problems with her eyes, the optometrist gave Sarah the VicRoads *Am I still fit to drive?* factsheet.

Sarah learned it was common for people to reduce their night driving, just as people might decide not to drive when faced with wet or frosty road conditions. The VicRoads material helped her identify driving situations in which she felt uncomfortable and to take steps to use alternative transport rather than endure stressful driving situations—such as navigating to an unfamiliar destination at night.

She decided to ask a friend for a lift to her regular book club get-together on Thursday nights and started catching a taxi or using rideshare if she needed to go out for one-off events in the city. Her daytime driving was unchanged as she was confident in her ability to drive safely during daylight hours.



## Self assessment guide

The statements in this guide are designed to help you think objectively about your current driving capability. Where you select 'Yes?', we have provided suggestions of actions you could take.

Reduced mobility	Yes?	Actions you can take
I have trouble turning my head or looking over my shoulder to check for traffic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>A registered occupational therapist trained in driver assessment can help you work out vehicle modifications and adjustments that will best support you. Examples of vehicle modifications include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reversing cameras and 'stick on' blind spot mirrors to assist when neck mobility is reduced.</li> <li>• Steering aids, to assist with limited arm function.</li> <li>• A simple exercise programme to help keep you strong and flexible. Ask your doctor or a physiotherapist for an appropriate exercise program for your health needs.</li> </ul>
I find it hard to move my foot from the accelerator to the brake pedal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I find it hard to turn the steering wheel.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I have trouble reversing my car as I find it hard to turn to look behind me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Changes to vision	Yes?	Actions you can take
When I have been looking at something close to me, it's sometimes hard to focus on things that are far away.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit your optometrist or ophthalmologist at least once every two years. Our vision changes as we age, but poor vision can often be corrected with a pair of glasses. Other conditions may require treatment or surgery to prevent further vision loss. Regular eye checks are important for all drivers.</li> <li>• More information about conditions affecting vision can be found on the VicRoads website.</li> </ul>
It is getting harder to judge gaps in the traffic when I merge or turn at an intersection.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I sometimes have trouble seeing road signs, lane markings, other vehicles or pedestrians.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I find it harder to see at twilight or at night.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Glare at night affects me more than it used to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Medications and general health	Yes?	Actions you can take
I take one or more medications daily.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Many medications can affect your mental alertness and coordination, especially when combined with alcohol. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about how your medications may affect your driving.</p> <p>Our <i>Your health and driving</i> factsheet explains what to do if you are diagnosed with a number of health conditions. The first step is to discuss the implications for driving with your doctor.</p>
I'm unsure if the medications I take can make me sleepy or affect my driving.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I sometimes drink alcohol as well as taking medications regularly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I have been diagnosed with a serious or chronic health condition.	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Driving practice	Yes?	Actions you can take
I sometimes find myself driving too slowly and holding up traffic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider booking a lesson with a driving instructor or the RACV <i>Senior driving program</i> to receive some independent, objective feedback on your driving.</li> <li>• Allow plenty of time for your journey and plan your route, including where you will park.</li> <li>• Take plenty of rests and don't drive when you are tired.</li> <li>• Drive less and reduce the amount of long distance driving you undertake.</li> <li>• Don't drive to unfamiliar places if possible.</li> <li>• Visit the VicRoads website for information on changes to road rules.</li> </ul>
Other motorists sometimes 'honk' at me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Intersections bother me because there is too much to watch from all directions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I find it difficult to decide when to merge with traffic on a busy highway.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I think I am slower than I used to be in reacting to dangerous driving situations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I don't like driving to unfamiliar locations anymore.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I'm less confident on the roads than I used to be and feel anxious about how busy they are.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I worry that I'm not keeping up with changes to the road rules.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Time to plan for change	Yes?	Actions you can take
My friends or family don't want to be a passenger in my car when I'm driving.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you experience any of these issues, we recommend you immediately consult your doctor who will help investigate the causes and assist you to manage your driving.</li> <li>• Friends or family may be nervous to raise their concerns with you. By inviting them to have a conversation, you make it easier for them to express their concerns.</li> <li>• Seek a formal driving assessment with a registered occupational therapist with training in this area.</li> <li>• Talk to your doctor about your concerns.</li> <li>• Refer to the VicRoads <i>Retiring from driving</i> factsheet for more information.</li> </ul>
I feel upset and confused in traffic or lose my way quite often, even in familiar areas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
My car now has quite a few dings and dents from minor collisions when driving or parking.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I've had several traffic infringements and 'warnings' from traffic police in the last two years.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I've recently had a number of 'near misses' while driving.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I've gone through a stop sign without stopping several times.	<input type="checkbox"/>	

## Reducing risk

None of us want to be a risk on the roads—to ourselves or to others. Most drivers make adjustments themselves when they realise their driving ability is deteriorating. The first step to reducing risk is to be aware of how you are driving. The second step is to actively manage your health by regularly consulting with your doctor and eye health professionals.



### Seek feedback

Ask friends or family who have observed your driving if they have noticed any changes or anything of concern (they might be glad you have raised the topic). Talk to your doctor or seek independent objective feedback by booking a driving lesson with a driving instructor who is trained to assess older driver skills—for example, as available via the RACV driving school. You can find out more in the fitness to drive section of the VicRoads website.



### Monitor your health

Health problems can affect our fitness to drive at any age. Some of these health conditions require notification to the VicRoads Medical Review team. Many health problems occur gradually, and can be difficult to notice—for example, eye sight changes occur gradually, and can affect our overall wellbeing and our ability to drive safely. Regular check-ups with your doctor and eye health professional will help to identify and manage issues. You may discover that there are treatments and devices which will support you to continue driving safely.



### Change behaviour

Many drivers adjust the way they drive in response to changes in abilities or confidence—for example, some drivers who find night driving difficult only drive during daylight hours. Others restrict their driving to local areas or reduce the amount of time they spend behind the wheel.

Some people decide to stop driving entirely, before they are legally required to do so. See the VicRoads factsheet *Retiring from driving* for more information.



### Change or adjust your car

If your car is old, a newer one may make it easier for you to drive with confidence. More recent models include features to increase your safety.

In some circumstances, modifications or adjustments can be made to your existing vehicle. These include additional mirrors, adjustable seating, parking sensors and cameras, hand controls instead of foot pedals, and steering aids to make the steering wheel easier to turn with one arm. Some of these modifications can only be used by people with a health condition and require the successful completion of an occupational therapy driver assessment.



## Talk to your doctor about your fitness to drive

It's important to ask your doctor for advice about the effect that any illness, disability or medical condition may have on your ability to drive safely. This includes the effects of any medicines you may be taking.

**All Victorian licence holders have a legal responsibility to report serious, permanent or long-term illnesses, disability, medical conditions or injuries to VicRoads.**

Being diagnosed with a health condition doesn't necessarily mean that you must stop driving. In most cases, managing long term serious conditions with medical support will mean you can continue to maintain your driving and mobility for longer. You may have conditions put on your licence—such as a requirement for vehicle modifications, limits on distance travelled or use of local roads, or only driving in daylight or off-peak hours. Conversely, you may be required to undergo regular medical or eyesight reviews.



## VicRoads Medical Review

Once you have notified VicRoads of your medical condition or disability, VicRoads will undertake a medical review. In this process, the medical report from your doctor or other health professional will be reviewed. If you don't have a medical report, we may request that you ask a doctor who is familiar with your medical history to complete one. VicRoads does not cover any costs associated with the medical reports or health appointments.

Once you've notified VicRoads of medical condition or disability, it's important to keep your address up to date. We will likely send you letters keeping you updated about the medical review. If you move, you must update your address within 14 days – you can do this online, over the phone, or at a VicRoads Customer Service Centre.

VicRoads assesses each medical report on a case-by-case basis. If you have a medical condition that could have an impact on your driving, VicRoads may ask you to do a driver assessment with an Occupational Therapy Driver Assessor. You are responsible for the cost associated with this assessment. VicRoads will write to you if you are required to undergo one of these assessments. This request may have been recommended by your medical practitioner, Victoria Police or by someone else who has reasonable concern about your ability to drive safely.

If your medical review assessment shows you can drive safely, you will keep your driver licence/learner permit. However, depending on the assessment results, you may have specific conditions placed on your driving—for example, you may be limited to driving in daylight hours or only around your neighbourhood (refer to *Conditions on your licence* on the next page).

VicRoads will only suspend or cancel your driver licence/learner permit if you:

- are assessed as medically unfit to drive
- fail a driving assessment
- do not provide a medical report upon request
- refuse or fail to undergo a test.

On the VicRoads website, you can find an information bulletin about the medical review process and frequently asked questions about assessing fitness to drive.



### Conditions on your licence

To help maintain your mobility, VicRoads may offer a conditional licence. This can mean the difference between giving up your licence completely, or continuing to drive in circumstances you find comfortable. Examples of licence conditions include:

- only driving in daylight or off-peak hours
- driving within a set radius from home to enable you to drive to places you normally visit in your local area—such as shops, medical centre etc.
- driving a vehicle with modifications.

## Quick links for further information

<b>VicRoads website</b> <a href="http://vicroads.vic.gov.au">vicroads.vic.gov.au</a> On the VicRoads website, you can search on any of the following terms to find specific information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• occupational therapy</li><li>• older drivers</li><li>• A–Z of Road Rules</li><li>• road rules videos</li><li>• fitness to drive.</li></ul>	<b>RACV website</b> <a href="http://racv.com.au">racv.com.au</a> Search the following terms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• older drivers</li><li>• <i>Senior driving program</i> (or telephone 1300 788 229)</li></ul> The RACV program <i>Years Ahead</i> is a free one hour presentation on road safety for seniors available for community groups and other organisations.
<b>Seniors Information Victoria</b> This independent service is operated by COTA Victoria (and funded by the Victorian Government) and offers free information on a wide range of issues of interest to older Victorians. Call 1300 135 080	<b>Disabled Motorists Australia</b> This group aims to support drivers with disabilities to obtain transportation and motoring independence. They offer member discounts, information, referrals and support on all transport and mobility issues. Call (03) 9386 0413