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Knowing when to park it

Older people and their families should talk about driving

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See, think, move.

Dr. Elizabeth Dugan has broken down the complex task of driving into these three basic abilities.

That's where older drivers and their loved ones can begin a discussion focusing on ability.

Age by itself does not hold the answer to who should drive, but the statistical deck is stacked against older people when it comes to how well they can see, think and move behind the wheel.

People older than 65 tend to have more illnesses, take more medications, and react more slowly than younger people. They are involved in fewer car crashes per mile driven than younger drivers, but when they do have accidents they have the lowest rate of survival. The number of older drivers in the United States is projected to double in the next 20 years.

"Driving is a privilege many of us will outlive by about a decade," Dr. Elizabeth Dugan writes in her new book, "The Driving Dilemma: The Complete Resource Guide for Older Drivers and Their Families" (HarperCollins, \$14.95). "That's why it's important to plan ahead."

An assistant professor in geriatric medicine at University of Massachusetts Medical School, Dr. Dugan has researched trust and communication between patients and doctors. She wrote the book with two kinds of

Attached files:

- » [Driving Safety Quiz](#)

people in mind: a grandmother wondering about her fitness to drive and a best friend worrying about whether her mother should still be driving.

Both the older person and the family member, often an adult child, need to know where to begin. If children who live far away are visiting their parents for Thanksgiving, their fresh eyes can pick up warning signs.

Dr. Dugan's book lists red-light signals such as recent accidents and traffic tickets or impaired vision, cognition and mobility. A driving-safety quiz, assistive devices to help with vision and movement, and state-by-state lists of laws and programs for older drivers come at the end of the book, after she suggests how to broach a difficult conversation.

That first step is huge, said Lissa Robins Kapust, a social worker at the DriveWise program at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Sessions with a social worker are bookends for the evaluation offered at the program, which includes neuropsychological assessment, occupational therapy and on-the-road driving testing that take into account underlying medical issues.

"This dilemma brings family members straight to their knees," she said. "The adult children are looking for anybody to be the bad guy, essentially."

It's no easier for the older person, for whom losses may be cascading.

"Driving has been viewed as one of the most critical markers of self-esteem and independence for the elderly," she said. "I've had patients say that the diagnosis of cancer was easier to manage than being told they can't drive."

Not every older person needs to stop driving. The advocacy group AARP militates against age-only restrictions on driving, predicting the adoption of use-restricted licenses, which limit driving to certain times or places.

Many older people already cut down when and where they drive, Dr. Dugan said. That strategy fits a gradual progression from unlimited driving to retiring from driving, an approach she encourages.

Primary care physicians can help families evaluate physical or mental impairments. Programs that go further include Beth Israel's DriveWise or the Driving Evaluations Clinic at Fairlawn Rehabilitation Hospital in Worcester.

At the other end of driving-age spectrum, younger drivers gradually gain independence and responsibility, Ms. Robins Kapust pointed out. As junior operators, when they can drive and whom they can have as passengers is restricted.

"What we don't have is a clear exit strategy," she said.

Dr. Dugan has been through the experience herself. After her mother collided with a 17-year-old driver while making a left turn close to home during the middle of the day, Dr. Dugan took the opportunity to assess whether she should still be driving.

She and her siblings talked with her mother about what to do. Her mother's vision test revealed that she had a disorder, so now the family is arranging transportation for her to get to church, the grocery store and other places in her small upstate New York town.

While not an easy transition, the safe solution works if it's reached through consensus.

"If this is the first issue likely to face an older loved one, starting out on a better foundation may make other

conversations easier,” she said. “Older adults are resilient. They have to be.”

For more information, go to www.drivingdilemma.com

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