

How seniors can safely stay behind the wheel

A greater sense of independence is often cited as the reason so many young people anxiously await the day they earn their drivers' licenses. But the connection between driving and independence is not lost on seniors, either.

Aging can take its toll on drivers, prompting such drivers' families to feel as if their loved ones' ability to safely operate motor vehicles has been compromised. However, many seniors can still safely operate motor vehicles, and those who do can take steps to ensure they're as safe as possible behind the wheel.

- Avoid driving on days when aches and pains are strong. Aches and pains are common side effects of aging, and seniors know that some days are better than others. Seniors' ability to control their vehicles may be compromised on days when stiffness,

aches or pains seem particularly strong, so it's best to avoid driving during these times. Fatigue may set in on days when aches and pains require extra effort to perform relatively simple tasks, and drivers of all ages should avoid driving while tired.

- Don't skip medical checkups. Few seniors may look forward to their medical checkups, but visits to the doctor can reveal issues that can help seniors be safer on the road. Schedule routine vision exams so eyeglass prescriptions are always up-to-date. In addition,



seniors should discuss hearing screenings with their physicians so they can ensure they can always hear sirens and other motorists while on the road. Great strides have been made in regard to helping people with fading hearing hear better, and seniors would be wise to take advantage of such advancements, which in-

clude hearing aids that can be connected to smartphones.

- Familiarize yourself with medication side effects. Whether they do so temporarily or permanently, many seniors take medications, and every medication comes with side effects. When filling a new prescription, carefully read the dosage and description label to ensure that it's safe to drive while taking the medicine. Make note of how you feel when taking a new prescription, avoiding driving if the medication makes you feel fatigued or drowsy or affects

your motor functions. If the side effects of a new prescription are making it difficult to safely operate a vehicle, discuss potential alternatives with your physician.

- Avoid driving in certain conditions. Driving in inclement weather, during rush hour and at night makes many drivers uncomfortable, regardless of their age. But such conditions can be especially dangerous for aging drivers whose vision and reaction times might be fading. Seniors who avoid driving in harsh conditions and heavy traffic may be more comfortable behind the wheel, thereby reducing their risk of accident or injury.

Seniors need not give up their drivers' licenses at the first signs of aging. But adjusting certain behaviors and exercising extra caution can help these men and women stay safe behind the wheel.

Develop a vehicle maintenance schedule

The sudden expense of vehicle repairs can throw monthly budgets into disarray. Maintaining a routine service schedule is one way for drivers to keep repair costs down.

The online automotive resources Edmunds.com says many car owners do not adequately prepare for scheduled maintenance, and may not give maintenance a thought until it's too late. The first step drivers take upon purchasing a new or pre-owned vehicle should be to familiarize themselves with the vehicle's owner's manual, which is filled with valuable information and likely includes maintenance interval recommendations.

Next, drivers should learn about their vehicle, which is particularly relevant when buying a preowned vehicle. Getting to know how the car or truck rides, as well as any sounds it may make, can provide drivers with a solid

foundation they can then use to keep their cars running strong.

Routine service typically includes tire rotation, oil changes and topping off of fluids. So just how long between service appointments can a car go? Here are some generalized estimates.

- Oil change: Drivers should err on the side of caution if they do a lot of stop-and-go driving and short trips. Other drivers may want to invest in vehicles that have oil change maintenance minders built in. A light or countdown will come on the dashboard, indicating when the oil has reached the end of its usefulness.

- Tire rotation: Rotating tires helps prolong the life of the tires and alleviates uneven tread and wear. During the rotation, each tire is removed and relocated to a different position to ensure that all the tires will wear evenly. Michelin Tires states

that tires should be rotated around every six months, or between 6,000 and 8,000 miles.

- Vehicle fluids: Your best bet is to see what the manufacturer recommends in regard to fluids such as transmission fluid, differential oil, brake fluids, coolant, etc. Some transmissions need regular maintenance, while others can go 150,000 miles between changes, according to the vehicle information site The Drive.

Coolant typically can last 100,000 miles. For these types of changes, it may be best to go to a mechanic or service center familiar with your make and model rather than a quick-lube center, as knowing when to drain and refill can be more complicated.

Service schedules can be designed to adhere to manufacturers' recommendations and drivers' personal preferences.

Prepare for an out-of-town breakdown

Though no one wants to think about the possibility of a vehicle breakdown while out of town, such things do happen. How prepared drivers are can go a long way toward determining how affected they will be if this happens.

- Get a checkup before skipping town. Many drivers may overlook the importance of vehicle checkups before departing on weekend getaways or longer trips. A full check-up can uncover any problems that might derail a trip.

- Examine your options in regard to emergency roadside assistance. Insurance providers typically offer emergency roadside assistance to policy holders for a nominal fee, and memberships in clubs such as AAA are inexpensive.

Drivers should note that out-of-town repairs may require costly overnight shipping of parts so travelers can get back on the road as quickly as possible. Roadside assistance

offered through an insurance company or motor club may include tow trucks free of charge up to a certain number of miles, allowing travelers to get their cars back home without breaking the bank.

- Inspect tires, including your spare. Many a road trip has been derailed or thrown off schedule due to a flat tire or tires. Before departing, check the condition of your existing tires, including the spare, as well as the air pressure in each one.

Many vehicle manufacturers recommend replacing tires at six years, regardless of tread wear. Tires that get heavy usage should be replaced even more frequently.

To determine if tread wear is something to worry about, Firestone recommends the penny test, which involves placing a penny head first into several tread grooves across the tire. If the top of Abraham Lincoln's head is always visible, then your tires

are shallow and worn and need to be replaced. But if part of Lincoln's head is always covered, your tires can probably withstand the trip.

- Bring along some basic tools. Pack some basic tools, such as screw drivers, wrenches, pliers, a trolley jack, a battery charger and, of course, duct tape, which may help you temporarily solve some issues on your own. This is especially important for drivers who intend to visit remote locations where mobile phone networks may be inaccessible and the nearest tow truck might be far away.

Hone your tire-changing skills before hitting the road and make sure tools are still capable of performing the kind of basic maintenance that might help your vehicle safely return to civilization.

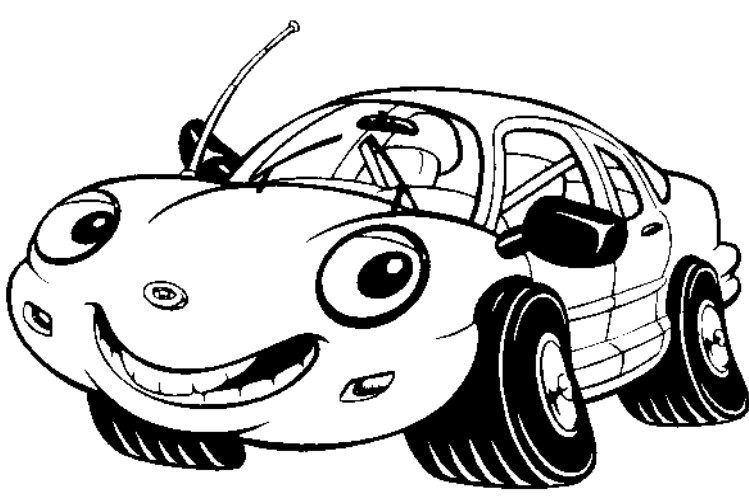
Vehicle breakdowns happen, even while on vacation. Some advance preparation can help drivers avert out-of-town disasters.

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