

Older drivers face confusing array of license laws

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The Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- Jerry Wiseman noticed that it was harder to turn and check his car's blind spots at age 69 than it was at 50. So the Illinois man and his wife took a refresher driving course, seeking tips to stay safe behind the wheel for many more years -- a good idea considering their state has arguably the nation's toughest older-driver laws.

More older drivers are on the road than ever before, and an Associated Press review found they face a hodgepodge of state licensing rules that reflect scientific uncertainty and public angst over a growing question: How can we tell if it's time to give up the keys?

Thirty states plus the District of Columbia have some sort of older-age requirement for driver's licenses, ranging from more vision testing to making seniors renew their licenses more frequently than younger people. At what age? That's literally all over the map. Maryland starts eye exams at 40. Shorter license renewals kick in anywhere from age 59 in Georgia to 85 in Texas.

This summer, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration proposed a national guideline for older driver safety that, if finalized, would push states to become more consistent. Among the recommendations: Every state needs a program to improve older-driver safety; doctors should be protected from lawsuits if they report a possibly unsafe driver; and driver's licenses should be renewed in person after a certain age, tailored to each state's crash data.

Here's the conundrum: "Birthdays don't kill. Health conditions do," said Joseph Coughlin, head of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's AgeLab, which develops technologies to help older people stay active.

Healthy older drivers aren't necessarily less safe than younger ones, Coughlin points out. But many older people have health issues that can impair driving, from arthritis to dementia, from slower reflexes to the use of multiple medications.

Older drivers don't crash as often as younger ones. But they also drive less.

Measure by miles driven the crash rate of older drivers begins to climb in the 70s, with a sharper jump at age 80, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Only teens and 20-somethings do worse.

That rising risk reflects the challenge for families as they try to help older loved ones stay safe..

Specialists say more seniors need to be planning ahead like Jerry Wiseman and his wife, Sandy.

"Absolutely we want to be as good drivers as we can possibly be for as long as we can," said Wiseman, of Schaumburg, Ill.

At an AARP course, Wiseman learned exercises to improve his flexibility for checking those blind spots. He takes extra care with left-hand turns, which become riskier as the ability to judge speed and distance wanes with age. He knows to watch for other changes.

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