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Driving When You Are Taking Medications

For most people, driving represents freedom, control and independence. Driving enables most people to get to the places they want or need to go. For many people, driving is important economically - some drive as part of their job or to get to and from work.

Driving is a complex skill. Our ability to drive safely can be affected by changes in our physical, emotional and mental condition. The goal of this brochure is to help you and your health care professional talk about how your medicine may affect your ability to drive safely.

How can medications affect my driving?

People use medicines for a variety of reasons, including:

- allergies
- anxiety
- cold
- depression
- diabetes
- heart and cholesterol conditions
- high blood pressure
- muscle spasms
- pain
- Parkinson's disease
- Schizophrenia

Medicines include medications that your doctor prescribes and over-the-counter medications that you buy without a doctor's prescription. Many individuals also take herbal supplements. Some of these medicines and supplements may cause a variety of reactions that may make it more difficult for you to drive a car safely. These reactions may include:

- sleepiness
- blurred vision
- dizziness
- slowed movement
- fainting
- inability to focus or pay attention
- nausea

Often people use more than one medicine at a time. The combination of different medicines can cause problems for some people. This is especially true for older adults because they use more medicines than any other age group. Due to changes in the body as people age, older adults are more prone to medicine related problems. The more medicines you use, the greater your risk that your medicines will affect your ability to drive safely. To help avoid problems, it is important that at least once a year you talk to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about all the medicines - both prescription and over-the-counter - you are using. Also let your doctor know what herbal supplements, if any, you are using. Do this even if your medicines and supplements are not currently causing you a problem.

Can I still drive safely if I am taking medications?

Yes, most people can drive safely if they are using medications. It depends on the effect those medicines - both prescription and over-the-counter - have on your driving. In some cases, you may not be aware of the effects. But, in many instances, your doctor can help to minimize the negative impact of your medicines on your driving in several ways. Your doctor may be able to:

- Adjust the dose;
- Adjust the timing of doses or when you use the medicine;
- Add an exercise or nutrition program to lessen the need for medicine; and

- Change the medicine to one that causes less drowsiness.

What can I do if I am taking medications?

Talk to your doctor honestly.

When your doctor prescribes a medicine for you, ask about side effects. How should you expect the medicine to affect your ability to drive? Remind your doctor of other medicines - both prescription and over-the-counter - and herbal supplements you are using, especially if you see more than one doctor. Talking honestly with your doctor also means telling the doctor if you are not using all or any of the prescribed medicines. Do not stop using your medicine unless your doctor tells you to.

Ask your doctor if you should drive - especially when you first take a medication.

Using a new medicine can cause you to react in a number of ways. It is recommended that you do not drive when you first start using a new medicine until you know how that drug affects you. You also need to be aware that some over-the-counter medicines and herbal supplements can make it difficult for you to drive safely.

Talk to your pharmacist.

Get to know your pharmacist. Ask the pharmacist to go over your medicines with you and to remind you of effects they may have on your ability to drive safely. Be sure to request printed information about the side effects of any new medicine. Remind your pharmacist of other medicines and herbal supplements you are using. Pharmacists are available to answer questions wherever you get your medicine. Many people buy medicines by mail. Mail-order pharmacies have a toll-free number you can call and a pharmacist available to answer your questions.

Monitor yourself.

Learn to know how your body reacts to the medicine and supplements. Keep track of how you feel after you use the medicine. For example, do you feel sleepy? Is your vision blurry? Do you feel weak and slow? When do these things happen?

Let your doctor and pharmacist know what is happening.

No matter what your reaction is to using a medicine - good or bad - tell your doctor and pharmacist. Both prescription and over-the-counter medicines are powerful - that's why they work. Each person is unique. Two people may respond differently to the same medicine. If you are experiencing side effects, the doctor needs to know that in order to adjust your medicine. Your doctor can help you find a medicine that works best for you.

What if I have to cut back or give up driving?

You can keep your independence even if you have to cut back or give up on your driving due to your need to use a medicine. It may take planning ahead on your part, but it will get you to the places you want to go and the people you want to see. Consider:

- rides with family and friends;
- taxi cabs;
- shuttle buses or vans;
- public buses, trains and subways; and
- walking.

Also, senior centers, religious, and other local service groups often offer transportation services for older adults in the community.

Who can I call for help with transportation?

- Call the ElderCare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 and ask for the phone number of your local Office on Aging, or go to their website at www.eldercare.gov.
- Contact your regional transit authority to find out which bus or train to take.
- Easter Seals Project ACTION (Accessible Community Transportation In Our Nation) can direct you to transportation resources near you. Call 1-800-659-6428 or visit online at www.projectaction.org.

Where do I find out more about medications?

Your first step is to talk with your health care professional. You also can contact the:

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration at 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332) or visit online at www.fda.gov/cder.
- You also can get a copy of the "Age Page On Older Drivers" from the National Institute on Aging by calling 1-800-222-2225, or by going to their website at www.niapublications.org.

Wear your safety belt

Always wear your safety belt when you are driving or riding in a car. Make sure that every person who is riding with you also is buckled up. Wear your safety belt even if your car has air bags.

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