

Driving retirement

As the Canadian population continues to age, the concept of driving retirement is a consideration for many older adults. Driving retirement should be viewed as an active process involving planning, support, and education, rather than a sudden cessation of driving. This is reflected in the Transportation Research Board's definition of driving retirement, "prior to cessation, the transition from operating an automobile to becoming a passenger or using alternative transportation."¹

Occupational therapists have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to work with those preparing for driving retirement to help ameliorate many of the negative consequences associated with this transition. Research indicates that driving retirement can lead to depression, declines in general health, and lack of community engagement.^{2,3} Activities of daily living often depend on driving, meaning that without transportation alternatives in place, retiring drivers may not be able to meet their daily needs.

There are a number of conditions and symptoms related to aging that lead to driving retirement, including changes in vision, perception, attention, decision making, and memory, as well as medical conditions such as diabetes and stroke.⁴ Education should be provided to drivers early, before any of these changes or conditions begin to affect their ability to drive safely.

Occupational therapists help older people drive safely longer, and also assist drivers when they are no longer able to drive. Strategies to prolong safe driving include ensuring a good fit between driver and car, providing assistive devices to make driving safer, and encouraging drivers to take refresher courses to increase confidence and skills. Drivers will often begin to self-limit their driving, and may only drive on familiar routes or during daylight.⁴ While these self-limitations can help extend years on the road, this is also an indication that alternative transportation options need to be considered to maximize community mobility.

The process of driving retirement involves both practical and emotional components that must be addressed. Some of the most commonly reported barriers to driving retirement are inconvenience and a lack of alternative transportation options.⁵ These practical aspects can be addressed through either group or individual interventions. Occupational therapists can help drivers identify available alternative transportation options, including buses, taxis, and volunteer drivers, and also explore how to talk with family and friends about transportation needs. Along with knowledge of existing options, it's important to inform retiring drivers about costs and how to physically access these services. Research indicates that older adults who received hands-on transit training were more likely to use alternative transportation.⁶

Emotional components of driving retirement include coping with the loss of a valued role and a loss of independence.⁷ Occupational therapists can help manage these losses by helping retiring drivers develop new lifestyle options and create plans to maintain engagement, social participation, and community mobility.⁸ Education and support groups are interventions shown to assist with the emotional aspects of driving retirement, as peer support and a shared experience are key elements to coping with this change. Given the strong emotions tied to driving cessation, researchers recommend that professionals with mental health training (such as occupational therapists) should be key stakeholders in these interventions.⁹

An occupational therapist's goals are to enable clients to remain engaged in their communities and to promote autonomy. Clients deserve to make informed choices about their mobility options to retain dignity and independence as they age.¹⁰ Occupational therapists have the medical knowledge to understand the effects of aging and varying diagnoses that impair driving abilities,¹¹ while concurrently using a holistic approach to understand the greater emotional implications of driving retirement for each individual. This knowledge and

client-centred approach allows occupational therapists to be well-positioned to collaborate with other health professionals to ensure retiring drivers continue to meet their daily needs, remain engaged in their communities, and feel prepared for the transition to driving retirement.



References

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