When is it time to stop driving?

by Luciana Cramer, Care Specialist

In October 2003, 86 year old George Russell Weller, staring straight ahead and holding a firm-grip on the steering wheel, plowed his 1992 Buick Le Sabre through 1,000 feet of a crowded farmers market in Santa Monica, CA. Since then the debate over elder driving has intensified. The tragedy, one of the worst traffic accidents in U.S. history, left 10 people dead and 63 seriously injured.

Catastrophic accidents like Weller's are rare, but records show that fatality rates for drivers begin to climb after age 65. The rate of deaths involving drivers age 75 to 84 is about three per million miles driven—similar to teen drivers. Once they pass age 85, vehicular fatality rates jump to nearly four times that of teens. There are now over 2 million drivers in that category on our roads. The numbers will increase as our baby-boom population ages.

While most of the discussion surrounding elder drivers revolves around the issue of age, and since no one can come to a figure of how old is too old to drive, states have struggled to produce effective legislation to make our roads safer. In many states, older drivers are required to appear in person to renew their licenses. Some form of medical evaluation is required in only 4 states (Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico and the District of Columbia). Road tests, which can be crucial in evaluating physical ability or mental awareness, are only required in Illinois and New Hampshire. In 18 states there are no restrictions at all.

A more productive approach would focus not on age, but on fitness. Normal aging does cause physical problems that may affect driving, such as diminished visual and auditory acuity, slower reflexes and lack of flexibility. However, we all age at different rates, and even the onset of dementia occurs differently in every affected person.

Notwithstanding physical impairments caused by normal aging, dementia patients have additional deficiencies in perception and visual processing; ability to pay attention for extended periods of time; ability to respond to multiple stimuli at once; ability to make correct judgments (such as which drivers have the right of way); and ability to react appropriately when pressured in a traffic situation.

Studies have shown that even though people in the early stages of dementia may be capable of driving under normal conditions, they have difficulty responding to new or challenging circumstances, and they are also at risk to becoming lost while driving. As dementia progresses into the middle stages, the ability to drive safely becomes highly compromised.

Until we have an implemented, more reliable system of evaluating driving fitness, it is left to drivers themselves, as a first level of defense, to evaluate their own driving abilities. A majority of older drivers decide by themselves to give up driving—over 600,000 a year, according to the American Journal of Public Health. Dementia however, also compromises the ability of self-assessment, and most drivers with dementia fail to realize that their driving is unsafe. Consequently, drivers with Alzheimer’s dementia often continue driving after they have been advised to stop or even after they have had a crash. If allowed to continue driving, 30 percent of drivers with dementia would have a crash under normal driving circumstances at the middle stages of the disease, as estimated by Researchers at Washington University in St. Louis. A cognitively impaired driver is also more likely to cause an accident without noticing it or becoming involved in it.

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In 2009, 84-year old Lois Phillips was on her way to the dentist when she drove for several miles on the wrong way in the fast lane of I-95 in Philadelphia. Before being stopped by the police she had left a trail of chaos, causing 4 accidents as motorists swerved and scrambled to avoid hitting her. Mrs. Phillips’ vehicle was unscathed and she did not even realize why she was being stopped. Fortunately, there were no fatalities in this case.

When self-assessment fails, the second level of defense is the driver’s family, who can monitor driving abilities, evaluate fitness, and need to be ready to make the very tough decision of taking away the keys. While riding as passengers within the vehicle, family members should look for signs of unsafe driving such as driving too slow or stopping for no reason, making turns from the wrong lane, turning in front of other cars, backing up or changing lanes without looking back or checking mirrors. Unexplained dings and dents around the vehicle are clear indicators that driving is no longer safe.

The third level of defense is the doctor. In California, physicians are required by law to report disorders characterized by lapses of consciousness, as well as Alzheimer's disease and related disorders. Commercial drivers over 65 are required to pass an annual physical to keep their licenses.

Car companies are also concerned about driving safety as we age. Many companies are studying and implementing features that make driving safer for older drivers, such as rear-view cameras and crash avoidance features.

Although the vast majority of accidents involving unfit drivers are minor fender benders, accidents with fatalities also occur in large numbers. Unfit driving is a matter of public safety and effective policies to better ensure drivers’ fitness would closely resemble the criteria for commercial drivers in California.

But until we have those policies in place, it is up to each individual and the community to ensure safe driving. Don’t hesitate to look for help if you suspect unsafe driving. The AARP offers a Driver Safety Program at sites around the country and online. Relatives and acquaintances may also request that the DMV review one’s driving ability by completing a Request for Driver Reexamination (form DS 699) or writing to the local Driver Safety Office.

Driving in America is synonymous with independence and a measure of self-worth. Giving-up driving is reportedly the most difficult decision a person can make, and it will affect their whole way of life. Families and friends should be prepared to provide alternative ways of transportation and emotional support for when driving is no longer possible, to address feelings of lost autonomy or depression.

And remember: giving-up driving is never too inconvenient when compared to the tragedy of a fatal accident. Be safe!
What Can We Expect in the Last Year?
For Families Caring for Those in the Late Stages of Dementia
With Jackie Marston

This is a six-week special group designed to attend to the particular needs of families caring for loved ones on the later stages of neurological degenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer’s, Lewy Body, fronto-temporal and other related dementias.

Fridays: Jan. 17 to Feb. 21
10 - 11:30 a.m.
At Senior Planning Services
1811 State Street - Santa Barbara

There is no cost for this program, however space is limited.
Please call 805.892.4259 x111 to register.

Confident Caregiver Series
Workshops for Family Caregivers of Dementia Patients

Free monthly workshops for family caregivers to learn about resources and strategies in providing care for their loved ones. A new series starts in January 2014:

- The Basics -
Memory Loss, Dementia and Alzheimer’s

Thursday, January 23, 2-4 p.m.
at Senior Planning Services
1811 State St., Santa Barbara
Please call to RSVP: 805.892.4259 x111

Dementia Education and Support Meeting
With Luciana Cramer, Care Specialist

Every month we will examine a different aspect of living with dementia with a presentation and a group discussion.
In partnership with the Sansum Clinic. This January:

What can we do to prevent or slow down cognitive decline?

Thursday, January 16, 4:30-6 p.m.
At Sansum Clinic
215 Pesetas Lane, 3rd Floor Conf. Room
Santa Barbara
Space is limited. Reserve your spot at SansumClinic.org/Classes or call toll-free 866.829.0909.
Free of charge and open to the community.

Brain Fitness for Successful Aging
with Kristen (Kai) Hoye, MSW
6 WEEK SERIES

Learn how to rewire & strengthen your brain, while combating stress. Informed by Dr. Kenneth Kosik’s: 5 Keys to Brain Fitness

Wednesdays, Jan. 15 – Feb. 19
10 a.m. – noon
at All Saints-by-the-Sea
82 Eucalyptus Lane, Montecito

Call 805.969.0859 to learn more or reserve a spot.
Class limited to 12 — Cost: $150

Help and Hope
for people diagnosed with alzheimer’s disease and related disorders and their families

Learn from the experts!
Share! Shake! Connect!

Help and Hope is a 2-day workshop where recently diagnosed people and their families learn valuable legal, medical and brain health information, and get ready to face the challenges ahead with a strong, positive outlook.

This March:
Thu.,6 and Wed.,19
10 a.m. – 3 p.m.
15 E. Carrillo
Santa Barbara

Participation is FREE. Registration is required.
Call 805.892.4259 x111

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A program of the Friendship Center
ALZConnected®
is now an AwardWinning Social Media!

Launched in 2012, ALZConnected® has become a very active social networking community and an invaluable resource for anyone impacted by Alzheimer’s disease or other forms of dementia.

After joining ALZConnected® at no cost, members can connect and communicate with people who understand their unique challenges. They can also pose questions and offer solutions to dementia-related issues, create public and private groups around a dedicated topic and contribute to message boards.

Caring for someone with Alzheimer’s disease can be lonely and overwhelming. On ALZConnected®, users don’t have to explain what it means to live with Alzheimer’s. The other users know, and are willing to offer their advice and solutions to common challenges. ALZConnected® allows all those affected by the disease to share answers, opinions, ideas and support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year through:

- **Message boards** where members can pose questions and offer advice to one another.
- **Community solutions** that include both public and private groups focused on topics of shared experience.
- **Personal inboxes** that let members communicate one-on-one by sending secure, private messages.

ALZConnected® has been named **Best Social Networking Site of 2013** with a Consumer Disease Focus by Strategic Health Care Communications. Last year the site had over 300,000 participants spending time searching for tips and offering support to all those impacted by Alzheimer’s. Visit the message boards and join the conversation at [alzconnected.org](http://alzconnected.org).

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**Think it will not happen to you?**

**Fact: Six out of 10 people with Alzheimer’s will wander.**

**MedicAlert® + Alzheimer’s Association Safe Return®** is a 24-hour nationwide emergency response service for individuals with Alzheimer’s or related dementia who wander or have a medical emergency.

888.572.8566 [medicalert.org/safereturn](http://medicalert.org/safereturn)

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**TrialMatch: Is it for you?**

Researchers test new ways to detect, treat and prevent Alzheimer’s disease and related dementia through clinical trials.

Alzheimer’s Association TrialMatch® is a free service that makes it easy for people with Alzheimer’s, caregivers, families and physicians to locate clinical trials based on personal criteria (diagnosis, stage of disease, etc.) and location.

Our continuously updated database of clinical trials include both drug and non-drug studies being conducted at nearly 500 trial sites across the country.

Learn more at [alz.org/trialmatch](http://alz.org/trialmatch)

**Sign up: eNewsletter**

Twice a year, we print a hard copy of our Chapter newsletter. We are working to grow our email database so we can send the newsletter electronically, which would save the Chapter thousands of dollars each year.

To sign up today, call 805.892-.4259, so you don’t miss a single thing!

**Looking for support?**

Visit our Chapter online, at [alz.org/cacentral](http://alz.org/cacentral), where you will find listings of all our support groups in your area.

**Become an Advocate**

The Alzheimer’s Association California Central Chapter invites you to become an Alzheimer advocate.

Please join us and speak up for the needs and rights of people with Alzheimer’s disease and their families and caregivers.

Join us in helping achieve our vision of creating a world without Alzheimer’s disease.
## SANTA BARBARA COUNTY SUPPORT GROUPS

### SANTA BARBARA

**Adult Child Caregivers**  
Home Instead Senior Care  
101 W Anapamu St., 2nd Floor - Conference Room  
First Monday of each month, 5:30 - 7pm  
Facilitator: Deanna Czenczelewski

**Spouse Caregivers**  
Grace Lutheran Church  
3869 State St.  
First and Third Tuesday of each month, 3 - 4:30 pm  
Facilitators: Deborah Brown and Fred DeLorenzo

**Persons with Early Stage Memory Loss (and their caregivers)**  
First and Third Wednesday of each month, 2 - 3:30 pm  
Pre-registration required.  
Call 805.892.4259 x111 to register.  
Facilitators: Rhoda Demonteverde, Joe Wheatley and Megan Grubaums

**Family Caregivers**  
Heritage House  
5200 Hollister Ave.  
First Monday of each month, 4:30 - 6 pm  
And third Tuesday of each month, 5:30 - 7 pm  
Facilitator: Jordana Lawrence

**Family Caregivers**  
Friendship Adult Day Center - Montecito  
89 Eucalyptus Road  
Third Monday of each month, 2 - 3:30 p.m.  
*Free Onsite Respite Care:*  
Call the Friendship Center a week before to reserve: 805.969.0859.  
Facilitator: Kai

**Family Caregivers**  
Friendship Adult Day Center - Goleta  
820 North Fairview Ave  
First Thursday of each month, 10 - 11:30 am  
*Free Onsite Respite Care:*  
Call the Friendship Center the day before to reserve: 805.969.0859.  
Facilitator: Barbara Davies

### Late Stage Family Caregivers

**Alexander Gardens**  
2120 Santa Barbara St  
Second Wednesday of each month, 10 -11:30 a.m.  
Call 805.892.4259 x111 to register.  
Facilitator: Mark Watson

**Cuidadores de Personas de Tercera Edad**  
Family Service Agency - Santa Barbara  
123 W Gutierrez St - Mondays, 5 - 6:30 pm  
*Para inscribirse llame al:* 805.965.1001 x223.  
Facilitator: Marco Quintanar

### SOLVANG

**Family Caregivers**  
Solvang Friendship House  
880 Friendship Lane  
First and Third Tuesday of each month, 2 - 3:30 pm  
Facilitator: Luciana Cramer

### LOMPOC

**Family Caregivers**  
Lompoc Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center  
1428 West North Ave  
Second Wednesday of each month, 1 - 2:30 pm  
Forth Thursday of each month, 7 - 8:30 pm  
Facilitators: Denise Daniel and Mary Lou Parks

### ORCUTT

**Family Caregivers**  
Magnolia  
4620 Song Lane  
Second Tuesday of each month, 6 - 7:30 pm  
Call 805.937.3332 for details.

### SANTA MARIA

**Family Caregivers**  
Merrill Gardens  
1350 Suey Road, (in the Wellness Center)  
Third Tuesday of each month, 10:30 - noon  
Facilitator: Gary Gross

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All Support Groups are confidential and offered at no cost.  
For more information, please contact Luciana Cramer at 805.892.4259 x111.