

Driving When You Have Sleep Apnea

You have been a safe driver for years. For you, driving means freedom and control. As you get older, changes in your physical and mental health can affect how safely you drive.

Sleep apnea causes breathing to be briefly interrupted many times during sleep. This condition occurs when the muscles in the back of the throat do not keep the airway open, even when a person is trying to breathe. After the pause in breathing, normal breathing returns, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound.

If you have sleep apnea, you may not know it right away because this disorder only occurs during sleep. A family member or partner may be the first to notice the signs. Sleep apnea prevents you from getting the deep sleep you need to function. You may find yourself falling asleep or unable to stay awake during the day. The continuous lack of sleep may even cause you to fall asleep at work, at home, or when you are driving.

How Can Sleep Apnea Affect the Way I Drive?

Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition that should not be ignored. It can make it very difficult to feel fully rested and alert. Self-treatment is not recommended. Left untreated, sleep apnea can seriously affect your ability to drive safely because it can cause:

- Drowsiness and prevent you from reacting quickly to traffic and road changes.
- Increased chances of work-related or driving crashes.
- Problems concentrating and focusing your eyes.
- Feelings of depression and/or irritability.
- Trouble learning and retaining information.

What Should I Do If I Have Any of These Signs?

As soon as you notice any of these warning signs:

- Tell your family or someone close to you.
- Talk to your health care provider. He or she can recommend treatment that will allow you to continue driving safely.

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- Do not drive if you are not being treated for sleep apnea.
- Consider making certain lifestyle changes such as avoiding alcohol, maintaining a healthy weight, and not smoking.

What Can I Do When Sleep Apnea Affects My Driving Safety?

It is important to know how sleep apnea is changing your driving safety. Your health care provider may suggest that you see a specialist to help you adjust to these changes.

Two types of specialists can help you:

- **A *driver rehabilitation specialist*** can test how well you drive on and off the road. This specialist also can help you decide when you need to stop driving. To find a driver rehabilitation specialist, go to www.aota.org/olderdriver. Under “Driving & Community Mobility,” click the button in the center of the page marked “Search for a Driver Rehabilitation Specialist.” This will link you to a national database. There you can search for names and addresses of local driver rehabilitation specialists.
- **An *occupational therapist with special training in driving skills assessment and remediation***. To find an occupational therapist, contact local hospitals and rehabilitation centers.

What Can I Do If I Have to Limit or Stop Driving?

If you have sleep apnea, you may still be able to drive safely with proper treatment. Until you are certain the treatment is working, have someone in the car with you when you drive to make sure you are not falling asleep. If your condition is not treated, do not drive. Instead, depend on others for driving.

Even if you have to limit or give up driving, you can stay active and do the things you like to do.

First, plan ahead. Talk with family and friends about how you can shift from driver to passenger.

Below are some ways to get where you want to go and see the people you want to see:

- Rides with family and friends.
- Taxis.
- Shuttle buses or vans.

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- Public buses, trains, and subways.
- Walking.
- Para transit services (special transportation services for people with disabilities; some offer door-to-door service).

Take someone with you. You may want to have a family member or friend go with you when you use public transportation or when you walk. Having someone with you can help you get where you want to go without confusion.

Find out about transportation services in your area. Many community-based volunteer programs offer free or low-cost transportation.

Where Can I Get Help With Transportation?

To find transportation services in your area, visit www.eldercare.gov or call the national ElderCare Locator at **800-677-1116**, and ask for your local Office on Aging.

If you have a disability, check out Easter Seals Project ACTION at www.projectaction.org or call **800-659-6428**. This project works with the transportation industry and the disability community to give people with disabilities more ways to get around.

Where Can I Learn More About Sleep Apnea?

First, talk with your health care provider.

For more information, contact:

- **AMERICAN ACADEMY OF SLEEP MEDICINE:** www.aasmnet.org, 630-737-9700
- **NATIONAL SLEEP FOUNDATION:** www.sleepfoundation.org, 703-243-1697
- To get a copy of *Facts About Sleep Apnea* from the National Institutes of Health, go to: www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health.
- To order a free copy of *Age Page on Older Drivers*, call the National Institute on Aging at 800-222-2225, or go to www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/older-drivers.
- **NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION:** www.nhtsa.gov, 888-327-4236

**Always Wear Your Seat Belt.
Do Not Use Your Cell Phone While Driving.**