

How old is too old to drive?

Hollywood legend and Danville, Illinois, native Dick Van Dyke is on the mend after a recent car crash left the 97-year-old with some soreness and stitches in his lip. The ordeal has caused some to wonder: how old is too old to be behind the wheel? And how do I broach the topic with my older friend or family member?

Courtney McFarlin, PA, is a primary care provider at OSF HealthCare who specializes in geriatrics. She says there's not one benchmark age where people should stop driving. She sees people who are mentally and physically sharp into their 90s. But typically, McFarlin says caregivers start to bring the subject up to her when their loved one reaches their 80s. At that age, the person may be getting physically weak and not able to easily get in and out of a vehicle or operate the controls. Their vision, hearing, depth perception, reaction time and other sensory attributes may be impaired, leading to crashes. They may have memory problems, forgetting why they got in the car.

The two parts of the conversation – making a plan with the caregivers and actually breaking the bad news to the older person – are both delicate and could employ different tactics.

For caregivers, McFarlin says the first question they often ask her is, "Is now the right time to take the keys away?"

"Ask yourself: would you feel comfortable with them driving your nine-year-old granddaughter around by themselves? Would you trust that? Do you feel they would be safe?" McFarlin says. "When it becomes personal and they start to think about the safety of someone so dear, it puts it into perspective."

Framing the conversation that way emphasizes that the issue is about everyone's safety, McFarlin says.

When it comes time to talk to mom or dad about driving, it's best to not be overly negative, says Ari Lakritz, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at OSF who has taken a keen interest in mental health care for older folks. He suggests appealing to the best parts of the person. This could be an accomplished career or things they still excel in at an advanced age, like gardening.

"Tell them: those things you love are not going to be restricted. You will still be able to participate in those to the fullest. What we want is for you to be healthy, safe and be able for you to participate for many years to come. And all that takes is a shift in the way we're doing things," Dr. Lakritz says.

Some older folks will resist. McFarlin says it then becomes a team effort involving the person's friends and family to make sure they stay safe and out of the driver's seat. Take the keys away and lock them up. Move the car from the driveway into the garage so the person doesn't look out the window longing for a drive. Plan activities or introduce them to a new hobby to take their mind off the issue.