

Driving is a symbol of independence. It allows the freedom to get to work, visit family, attend appointments, and engage in daily life on their own terms. Some individuals drive because they enjoy it. For others, driving is their livelihood.

Many people with Parkinson's disease continue to drive long after their diagnosis. But, as symptoms become more severe, individuals and those around them may notice a decline in their driving ability. Some others remain unaware of these changes.

Giving up driving is not a small decision. It can mean a loss of independence, freedom, and identity, and may also have financial impacts.

This transition can be difficult and deserves to be acknowledged and planned for.

This guide is designed to help you understand how Parkinson's may affect driving, recognize early warning signs, understand your responsibilities in Ontario, and plan ahead for adapting or stopping driving safely.

WHAT DRIVING REQUIRES

Driving is one of the most complex tasks we perform routinely. It requires us to use multiple physical and cognitive skills at once, often in a constantly changing environment.

These include:

- Physical strength and agility
- Quick movement and fast reaction times
- Attention
- Continuous information processing
- The ability to judge distances and space (visuospatial skills)
- Good hearing and vision
- The capacity to manage multiple tasks at once (multitasking)
- Visual perception (contrast sensitivity)

HOW PARKINSON'S AFFECTS DRIVING

Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative disease that affects both motor and non-motor abilities, including:

- Tremors, stiffness, and slowness of movement can affect steering, braking, and reaction time
- Difficulty managing multiple tasks, reduced ability to judge distance, and memory changes can affect safe driving
- Reduced contrast sensitivity makes it harder to separate objects from their background, especially in low light or fog
- Sleep difficulties and medication side effects can cause sudden drowsiness
- Impaired attention may affect detection of hazards, road signs, and traffic signals

Is Parkinson's affecting my driving?

Your driving may be impacted if you notice these changes:

Physical changes

- Tremor impacting hand movement
- Stiffness affecting your ability to turn, brake, steer, or move your feet between pedals
- Moving slower or differently than usual behind the wheel

Cognitive changes

- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Trouble judging distance or reacting quickly
- Confusion in traffic

Driving-related changes and feedback

- Drifting out of lane or poor positioning
- Minor collisions, dents, or near misses
- Getting lost on familiar routes
- Concerns raised by family, passengers, or other drivers on the road



Staying safe while driving

As long as you are driving, the ADAPT framework can help extend safe driving.

A

Adjust driving habits (avoid night driving, etc.)

D

Discuss concerns with doctor and family

A

Attend regular driving evaluations

P

Plan transportation alternatives early

T

Time medications appropriately

LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES IN ONTARIO

A Parkinson's disease diagnosis does not automatically mean losing your licence, but it does come with legal responsibilities.

You are required to disclose conditions that may affect your ability to drive safely when renewing your licence. Your health care provider may also have a mandatory obligation to report conditions that pose a higher risk on the road.

The Ministry of Transportation (MTO) may require a medical report and a functional driving assessment.

WHEN IT IS TIME TO STOP DRIVING

Unlike getting a licence, deciding to stop driving has no clear roadmap. It is a personal, gradual, and often difficult transition. It is a loss of independence, spontaneity, and a skill built over a lifetime.

This transition does not happen all at once. Many people first adapt their driving before eventually stopping. Planning this process intentionally is often better than having it forced by a crisis.

Consider stopping when it becomes difficult to consistently drive safely.

TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES

- Ask family and friends for support
- Use ride-sharing or taxi services
- Access public transit (including door-to-door services)
- Explore community and volunteer transportation programs



Where to find help

Support is available through these resources:

Person/Service	What they can help with	How to access
Neurologist or family doctor	Driving fitness, medication effects, and referrals for assessments.	Your primary care provider
Occupational therapists specializing in driving rehabilitation	Driving evaluations, recommendations, and transition support	Ask your doctor for a referral
Ministry of Transportation (MTO):	Functional assessment process and licence status/requirement	Tel: 416-235-1773, 1-800-268-1481 (toll-free within Ontario) Website: www.ontario.ca/page/medical-review-ontario-drivers
Local Parkinson's support group	Peer support, shared experiences, emotional support	Parkinson Society Southwestern Ontario i You can find support group listings here: https://psso.ca/programs-services/support-group-listings/
Para-transit programs	Door-to-door transportation for individuals who cannot use regular transit	To find services available in your city, dial 2-1-1 or visit www.211ontario.ca i Browse <i>Disabilities > Transportation for people with disabilities</i>

What can you do now?

You do not have to figure this out alone. A good first step is an honest conversation with yourself, someone you trust, or your doctor. If you are unsure about your driving, ask for a professional opinion. If the time to stop driving has come, know that support and alternatives are available.

Sources

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