



MEMORY LOSS AND DRIVING

A guide for the person with memory problems

MEMORY LOSS AND DRIVING

As we grow older our chances of developing a significant memory or cognitive problem, such as **dementia**, increase gradually over time. Currently it is estimated that there are over 33,000 people in Ireland who have a dementia and as our society ages this figure is set to grow significantly. Therefore the issue of driving and dementia is becoming increasingly important.

DRIVING

Driving is an important life skill to most adults in our culture. It represents independence, freedom and control. For many of us driving enables us to get to and from work, do our shopping and helps us to keep in touch with family, friends and the community in general. For some, driving is an integral part of their jobs.

It is important to bear in mind that *“driving is a complicated task that requires a split-second combination of complex thought processes and manual skills. To drive, a person needs to be able to make sense of and respond to everything they see, to ‘read the road’, to follow road signs, to anticipate and react quickly to the actions of other road users, to take appropriate action to avoid accidents and to remember where they are going.”* (UK Alzheimer’s Society)

HOW MIGHT A DEMENTIA EFFECT DRIVING ABILITY?

How a dementia might effect one’s driving ability will vary from person to person and may also depend on the type of dementia that one has. However in general the following may impact on driving ability:

- **Perception** – a dementia may effect a person’s ability to recognise or understand what they see.
- **Attention** – a person with dementia may have difficulty focusing on more than one thing at a time. They may be easily distracted. For example they may have difficulty driving and holding a conversation. They may also have difficulty reacting to traffic and pedestrian situations that occur.
- **Judgement** – a person with dementia may have impaired judgement. i.e. they might make the wrong decision in a situation.
- **Impulsiveness** – a person with dementia may react to a situation without considering or realising the consequences of their actions.

IF I AM DIAGNOSED WITH DEMENTIA DO I HAVE TO STOP DRIVING?

The answer is ‘maybe’. A diagnosis of dementia does not automatically mean that you have to stop driving now, but almost certainly will mean that you have to plan for stopping driving at some time in the future. The questions that you need to ask are

- is it safe for me to continue driving?
- am I a risk to myself and/or others?

It is possible that your doctor or a member of your family may ask you to stop driving.

If you are unsure of your ability to drive safely then you should stop immediately.

INSURANCE

If you are diagnosed with a dementia then you are obliged to inform your insurance company. If you do not inform your insurance company about the diagnosis then, in the event of an accident, your insurance may be invalid.

WHAT WILL MY INSURANCE COMPANY DO WHEN I DISCLOSE MY DIAGNOSIS?

This will depend on the insurance company. The majority of companies will request evidence from your doctor that you are safe to continue driving. Your doctor will probably review your situation at regular intervals and you should inform your insurance company again if your condition changes.

The insurance company should not automatically increase or 'load' your insurance premiums if your doctor has stated that you are capable of continuing to drive safely. If you feel that you have been unfairly treated then you should contact the **Financial Ombudsman** on 01 662 0899 or the **Insurance Information Service** on 01 676 1914.

WHAT IS AN 'ON-ROAD' DRIVING ASSESSMENT?

Your doctor may advise you to undertake an 'on-road' driving assessment. This is not like the learner's driving test. Normally an assessor will accompany you as you drive around familiar routes and assess your ability to drive competently and safely. They will then furnish you with a report that you can submit to your Insurance company. They may also recommend some retraining sessions with them. A copy of this report is sometimes sent to your doctor. In general it is recommended that this road-test is carried out at least every six months.

Listed are three organisations in Ireland that provide this service:

Transport and Mobility Consultants – Ireland

19 Glenmalure Pines
Glenmalure Golf Club
Greenane, Rathdrum, Co.Wicklow
Tel: 0404 43854
Mobile: 087 263 5025
Email: tonyregan@ireland.com
<http://www.transportandmobility.ie/>

Disabled Drivers Association,

Ballindine, Co. Mayo,
Tel: (094) 9364054 / 9364266
Fax: (094) 93643360

<http://www.ddai.ie/contact-us/>

Southern Mobility

Cork

Contact: Tomás O'Callaghan

Tel: 087 9304335

Email: southernmobility@eircom.net

<http://www.southernmobility.ie/>

The 'on-road' driving assessment report may advise you to cease driving or it may suggest that you be restricted in your driving in some way. These restrictions might include:

- No night driving
- Only driving in local, well-known areas
- Avoiding heavy traffic/rush hour
- Avoiding driving in bad weather
- Not driving alone is recommended wherever this is possible

DO I HAVE TO CONTACT THE LOCAL DRIVER LICENSING AUTHORITY?

The situation with regard to the Driver Licensing section of the Road Safety Authority is unclear at this time, without a clear public policy on the reporting of illness which occurs in between licence renewals.

MY DOCTOR HAS ADVISED ME TO STOP DRIVING. WHAT CAN I DO?

You should follow the doctor's advice and stop driving. Discuss the situation with family and consult with a social worker about other methods of transportation. For example, you may wish to use the proceeds of the sale of your car to set up an account with a local taxi firm. Other possibilities in rural areas include the Rural Transport Schemes, which provide bus or taxi services. Your Public Health Nurse may be able to help you with locating the service nearest you.

WHAT IF I CONTINUE TO DRIVE DESPITE MY DOCTOR ADVISING ME TO STOP?

You are a high risk to yourself and other road users and you should therefore stop driving.

If you continue to drive against your doctor's advice then it is highly likely that your insurance and licence will be invalid.

In very rare circumstances your doctor may inform An Garda Síochána of your actions if it is felt that you pose an immediate risk to the safety of others.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

You may be eligible to receive a Disabled Person's Parking Card (the Blue Badge). Generally these cards are reserved for people with physical disabilities but each case will normally be examined individually.

You may also be eligible for Mobility Allowance if you are under the age of 66. Again this benefit is generally reserved for people with a physical disability but will be assessed on an individual basis.

Contact your local health centre or Citizen's Information Centre for details.