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Smart Features for Mature Drivers

The fact is, we are all changing, all of the time. As we age, changes in our strength, mobility and flexibility; vision and scanning skills; and the speed at which we can process visual information make us less comfortable and less in control behind the wheel.

These changes may be so subtle we don't notice them happening, but they are. For example:

Age 40: Mental sharpness begins to diminish; thought processing slows; multitasking is more challenging; night vision and sensitivity and recovery from glare diminish

Age 50: Many people require bifocals; reaction time slows

Age 60: Muscle strength and range of motion decrease by as much as 25%

Age 70: Arthritic joints may make movement painful and restrict mobility; conditions such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, hypertension and diabetes may affect perception and behavior.

No matter where you fall in this age range, choosing a car with the right features can help improve your safety and comfort behind the wheel.

So, which vehicle is right for you? AAA worked with the University of Florida National Older Driver Research and Training Center to answer this question. The answer wasn't quite as simple.

Mature drivers should choose a vehicle based upon their specific needs.

Together with NODRTC, AAA identified the many vehicle features that can optimize safety and comfort for seniors. Before you buy your next vehicle, know of the many features now available on cars. Using the menus to the left, learn which features may be specifically helpful based upon specific conditions or limitations.

- **Adjustable pedals:** With a push of a button, the driver can adjust the accelerator and brake pedals, a feature especially helpful for petite drivers to reach the pedals while ensuring they are a safe distance (about 12 inches) from the airbag mounted in the steering-wheel hub.
- **Large knobs and buttons with contrasting text:** Audio and climate controls with large features and contrasting text are easier to see and manipulate, and thus less distracting.
- **Power Mirrors:** Power mirrors are easier to adjust for drivers with limited strength or arthritis.
- **Large/wide-angle mirrors:** For those who have difficulty turning or twisting to look to the rear when changing lanes or backing up, large wide-angle mirrors can improve visibility.
- **Visors and Extendable Visors:** Visors that extend to protect drivers from glare are most important.
- **Power-operated, 6-way adjustable seats:** These require less strength to adjust. At a minimum, the seats should offer six-way adjustment: forward and backward, up and down, and seatback forward and backward.
- **Seat Height:** The ideal seat height is between mid-thigh and lower buttocks. A low-slung sports car may look snazzy, but it requires extra strength and flexibility to get into and out of the vehicle. Likewise, a tall SUV requires extra effort to climb up into a seat.
- **Low Door Threshold:** Low door thresholds, or "sills" make entry and egress easier, reducing the need to lift the leg over the threshold.
- **Heated Seats:** Heated seats can help improve comfort for drivers with back pain.
- **Lumbar Support:** Lumbar support can help improve comfort for many drivers, especially those with back pain.
- **Four doors:** Though not as sporty, four-door models make entry and exit easier, especially if the car has a rear seat. Two-door cars also have longer, heavier doors, requiring more strength to open and close.
- **Keyless entry:** Operated by a push-button on the key fob, this feature is good for those with arthritic hands who find it painful to twist a key.
- **Keyless ignition:** Utilizing a dash-mounted push-button instead of a traditional key, keyless ignition is beneficial to those with stiff or painful fingers who find it difficult to twist the ignition key.
- **Tilt/telescoping steering wheel:** The extra adjustments help the driver find a safe distance from the front airbag, as well as a comfortable position that alleviates knee, back, hip, neck or shoulder pain.



- **Thick Steering Wheel:** Thicker steering wheels require less hand and wrist strength to grip and handle.
- **Adjustable Seat Belts:** Adjustable seat belts assist drivers in reaching for buckling/unbuckling the seat belt. It also helps drivers find a comfortable position for the belt.
- **Proven Crashworthiness:** A new vehicle should exemplify proven crashworthiness based upon crash test and rollover ratings available at www.safercar.gov and www.iihs.org/ratings.
- **Adjustable head restraints:** This type of restraint moves forward to cushion the head if the car is hit from behind, helping reduce neck injuries.
- **Brake assist:** Like the term implies, brake assist helps the driver generate enough force during emergency braking to stop the car in time to prevent a collision.
- **Anti-lock brakes:** ABS prevents the wheels from locking during hard braking, helping the driver retain steering control and eliminating the need to "pump" the brakes, an action that might be challenging for some older drivers.
- **Side/side-curtain airbags:** Side airbags protect the torso, pelvis and head. Older, frail adults - more prone to death or injury in crashes than younger people - may especially benefit from additional airbags.
- **Dual-stage/dual-threshold airbags:** The airbag inflation force varies based on driver/passenger weight, distance from airbags and crash severity. This is important for frail adults who may be injured by airbags that deploy too hard.
- **Stability-control:** This feature helps prevent loss of control in a turn, especially on slippery roads. It's particularly beneficial to older drivers with slowed reaction times, because it automatically makes quick corrections to keep the car on course.

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