

Smart auto features for older drivers

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Dear Savvy Senior,

Are there any good resources that offer tips on what older drivers should look for when purchasing a new car?

My wife and I have been looking around, but at ages 69 and 71 we want to make sure we get a good vehicle that meets our future needs and current budget. — Senior Driver

Dear Senior,

The National Older Driver Research and Training Center at the University of Florida and AAA recently developed a handy new guide called “Smart Features for Mature Drivers” that’s perfect for seniors who are in the market for a new car or those evaluating their current one. Here’s what you should know.

Shopping guide

Even healthy seniors face some degree of physical challenge (reduced vision, mobility, strength, range of motion and reaction time) that can make driving more difficult.

Finding a vehicle with features that meet those challenges can make a big difference in both pleasure and safety.

“Smart Features for Mature Drivers” is a great tool to help seniors evaluate a vehicle, by focusing on the different features that address age-related problems. Here are some of the features they recommend you look for, depending on what ails you:

- **Limited range of motion:** Drivers with limited flexibility in the neck, back and arms usually have a difficult time looking over their shoulder to back-up or to merge into traffic, and have a hard time reaching for their seat belt too.

These drivers can benefit from large, wide-angle mirrors which minimize blind spots, a tilt and telescoping steering wheel that offers more comfortable positions to alleviate neck and shoulder pain, adjustable seat belts that are easier to reach, and heated seats with lumbar support to help those stiff achy backs.

- **Limited mobility:** If you suffer from hip or leg pain or limited knee range of motion, look for vehicles that have low door thresholds, six-way adjustable power seats, and seat heights that come up to your mid-thigh level.

These features make it easier for you to get into and out of the vehicle.

- **Arthritic hands:** Drivers who have hand or wrist arthritis or a weak upper body can benefit from thick steering wheels which are easier to grip, keyless entry and ignition that eliminates twisting and turning, power mirrors and seats that are easy to operate, larger dashboard controls with buttons versus knobs that are easier to manipulate, and four-door models versus two-door cars which have longer heavier doors that are harder to open.

- **Diminished vision:** Drivers with diminished vision and sensitivity to glare will find extendable sun visors helpful, as well as larger audio and climate controls with contrasting text which are easier to see.

- **Short drivers:** For older drivers that are small in stature it can be a challenge to comfortably reach the pedals without being too close to the airbag or being able to see over the steering wheel safely.

To help with these problems, look for vehicles with adjustable foot pedals, tilt and telescoping steering wheel and six-way adjustable seats.

Safety features

AAA also recommends that all seniors, regardless of their health issues, look for vehicles with solid safety features and a proven safety record. Start by checking the vehicle’s crash test and rollover ratings which you can find at www.safercar.gov.

Other safety features to look for include: side and dual-stage/threshold airbags that adjust the deployment force based on the severity of the crash; adjustable head restraints and extra padding that moves forward to cushion the head, reducing neck injuries when a car is hit from the rear; antilock brakes that prevents the wheels from locking during emergency braking; and dynamic stability control which helps prevent loss of control in a turn.

Savvy Tip: To get a copy of the “Smart Features for Mature Drivers” brochure, call your local AAA (call 800-564-6222 to get your local number).

You can also view it online at www.aaa.comseniors along with their list of 2008 vehicles that provides these senior-friendly features.

Send your senior questions to: Savvy Senior, P.O. Box 5443, Norman, OK 73070, or visit www.savvysenior.org.

Jim Miller is a contributor to the NBC Today show and author of “The Savvy Senior” book.