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AAA Helps Aging Drivers Match Vehicles to Physical Changes

Research Identifies Vehicle Features That Improve Safety, Comfort of Aging Drivers and Continues AAA Commitment to Lifelong Safe Mobility

Research results showing how physical conditions faced by senior adults can be mitigated by choosing a vehicle with appropriate features was announced today by AAA, in partnership with the University of Florida's National Older Driver Research and Training Center (NODRTC).

AAA and the NODRTC researchers released its Smart Features for Mature Drivers guide today at the New York International Auto Show.

AAA's Smart Features for Mature Drivers identifies vehicle components that can assist drivers with visual, physical and mental changes that are frequently encountered as they age. The AAA information pointed out conditions often faced by senior adults, including diminished vision, arthritic hands, hip and leg pain and limited upper-body range of motion, highlights features that best address each condition and provides examples of vehicles exemplifying those features.

"Driving is a key to social interaction and healthy living and independence," said Steve Mazor of the Automobile Club of Southern California's Automotive Research Center in Diamond Bar, Calif. "This is important information for this growing segment of the driving population. We encourage older drivers and their families to use the Smart Features for Mature Drivers research as a guide when selecting their next vehicle or evaluating their current one because specific vehicle features can help improve driver safety and comfort."

Persons over age 65 represent the fastest growing population segment in the United States. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, there were more than 37 million people age 65 and older in the United States in 2006 and 29 million were licensed drivers in 2005. It is estimated that by 2020 there will be more than 40 million licensed drivers age 65 and older.

As a person ages, physiological changes can affect driving ability. Muscle strength, reaction times, range of motion and visual acuity tend to diminish as part of the natural aging process. Also, the increased prevalence of health issues such as arthritis, hip and knee joint pain or osteoporosis can reduce the ability to safely execute the complex task of driving.

In a recent survey, AAA found that 43 percent of motorists over the age of 55 suffered from at least one of nine driving related difficulties commonly caused by aging, and nearly one out of four motorists over 55 plan to purchase a vehicle in the next two years.

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Because everyone ages differently, AAA recommends mature drivers look for vehicles with features that address their specific needs and health issues. Some of the recommendations included in Smart Features for Mature Drivers include:

- Drivers suffering from hip or leg pain, decreased leg strength or limited knee range of motion should look for vehicles with six-way adjustable power seats and seat heights that come between the driver's mid-thigh and lower buttocks. Both of these features can make it easier for drivers to enter and exit a vehicle.
- Drivers with arthritic hands, painful or stiff fingers or diminished fine motor skills would benefit from four-door models, thick steering wheels, keyless entry and ignition, power mirrors and seats and larger dashboard controls with buttons.
- Drivers with diminished vision or problems with low contrast sensitivity will find helpful vehicles with extendable sun visors, large audio and climate controls and displays with contrasting text.

AAA's Smart Features for Mature Drivers also includes vehicle features recommended for all seniors, regardless of their health issues, such as:

- Proven crashworthiness, crash test and rollover ratings from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (safercar.gov) and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (iihs.org/ratings)
- Side and dual-stage/threshold airbags that adjust the deployment force based on the severity of the crash
- Adjustable head restraints and extra padding
- Antilock brakes
- Dynamic stability control

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