



March 26, 2008

## The right car features could help older drivers

You could say Daniel Cleary made a hip choice when he decided to lease a Saturn sport utility vehicle a couple of years ago.

The 83-year-old New City man has had one of his hips replaced, and was looking for a vehicle that offered him an easy way in and out.

"I'm tall enough that my backside just slides onto the seat," Cleary said yesterday. "I swing around and throw my feet in."

Being in the right car can help keep older drivers, many of whom have slower reaction times, poorer vision at night and a decreased range of motion, safe on the road, while ensuring that senior citizens don't lose their independence.

AAA and the University of Florida's National Older Driver Research and Training Center recently teamed up to produce a list of features found in cars and SUVs that can help older drivers remain comfortably behind the wheel.

They range from clean dashboards with large knobs for drivers with vision problems to thick steering wheels and keyless entry for drivers with arthritic hands.

"The car that they've always driven may not be the best for them as they age," said Lori MacLeod, coordinator of the 5-year-old Rockland County Safe Older Driver Consortium.

Aging affects how we drive.

On one hand, older drivers are statistically safer drivers, taking less risks on the road, wearing their seat belts, and yes, driving a *little* slower than the speed limit.

At the same time, many drivers 65 and older are dealing with changes to their bodies. Their eyesight isn't what it used to be, those creaks in their bones make it a little harder to look over their shoulder and it's a little tougher for their foot to reach the brakes because they've become shorter.

MacLeod said sometimes the biggest obstacle is getting older drivers to concede age-related issues are affecting their driving.

"They don't want to admit they have a problem because they don't want anyone telling them they can't drive," MacLeod said.

By 2020, one in five drivers will be over the age of 65. That adds up to 40 million people.

AAA found in a recent survey that 43 percent of drivers over the age of 55 - AAA calls them "mature drivers" - suffered from at least one of nine driving related difficulties commonly caused by aging and that nearly one out of four drivers over 55 planned to buy a car in the next two years.

"You have to ask yourself, 'What is my weakness? What is the biggest problem I'm suffering

from?' " AAA spokeswoman Christie Hyde said.

People need more light to see at night or in poor weather conditions after they turn 40, said MacLeod, an occupational therapist at Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw. Plus, glare from headlights becomes a problem.

Ralph Cassiere of New City knows that to be true. The 78-year-old no longer drives after dark.

"I don't like it because the lights they have on the cars, those new lights blind you," Cassiere said yesterday. "They're bad. They're bad for senior citizens anyway."

Once you hit 50, you can expect your reaction time to slow down.

"By the time you're 60 years old, your muscle strength and range of motion decrease by as much as 25 percent," Hyde said.

Charles Gardella, who supervises AARP Driver Safety Program in Rockland, said choosing the right features came down to a person's specific needs. Although his program is for people 50 and older, the average students are in their 70s and 80s and favor simplicity.

New technologies designed to make driving safer, such as adaptive cruise control or rear cameras, are not always embraced.

"The 80s and 90s think it's very distracting," Gardella said. "But the younger group is all into it."

Hyde agreed that there are no absolutes, but said someone looking for the best visibility should probably lean toward a sedan.

"They have nice big windows, easy to see things," Hyde said.

Crossover vehicles, a marriage of a sedan and SUV, make it easy for drivers with back problems to slide in and out of the vehicle because of the height of the seat.

New City resident Michael Gioeni, 77, likes that his 2002 Ford Taurus has power seats. Both he and his wife drive the car, and constantly have to adjust the seats.

"You don't have to worry about pushing, pulling, anything like that," Gioeni said yesterday afternoon before a meeting of the New City II Senior Club at the Street Community Center in New City.

Most drivers know steering wheels can be adjusted to go up and down, but those suffering from knee, back, hip, neck or shoulder pain might look for a car with a telescoping wheel, which goes in and out. That ensures the driver is at least 12 inches away from the steering-wheel air bag, avoiding the danger of being too close to it when it deploys.

AAA has a list of more than 100 vehicles with the different features on its Web site ([www.aaa.com/seniors](http://www.aaa.com/seniors)), but Hyde said it's strictly a guide - the auto club is not recommending any particular makes or models because older drivers should choose cars based on individual needs.

---