

## Driving into the sunset

Is it time to get seniors off the road?

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Feeling creaky? Eyes not what they used to be? The remedy could be as close as your garage.

Whether suffering from arthritis, weakening eyesight, hip pain or diminished mobility, Canadians will increasingly have the ability to match their chronic ailments to their cars as the transportation industry prepares for one of the biggest shifts in driving demographics on record.

In the next three years, the oldest baby boomers will turn 65. By 2015, for the first time in Canadian history, seniors will outnumber children under 15. By 2031, the number of elderly people in Canada will more than double to 9.1 million from 4.3 million, with seniors accounting for roughly one in four drivers.

Ongoing and proposed changes in everything from intersection layouts to vehicle ergonomics and licensing systems are being designed to keep both these greying drivers -- and the younger people with whom they'll share the road -- safer.

"Generally, when you make things safer for older drivers, you make them safer for everybody," said Transport Canada's Paul Boase, co-investigator for the Canadian Driving Initiative for Vehicular Safety in the Elderly.

"Ten years ago, agencies were only thinking in terms of whether or not a driver was fit to be on the road. Now we're seeing a much larger look at the whole transportation process."

Today's vehicle manufacturers are literally putting their engineers in older people's orthopedic shoes to meet the boomers' future driving needs. Both Ford Motor Company and Nissan/Infiniti have their young designers don special aging suits that simulate mobility and vision limitations through such contraptions as cataract goggles and flexibility-restricting body casts.

However, manufacturers say their efforts aren't just for the older set.

"Nissan has no intention of building an 'elderly car'," said Etushiro Watanabe, associate chief designer for the company. "The improved ergonomics benefit drivers of all age groups."

Many of the latest innovations designed to either soothe or prevent irritation of certain health conditions have been documented by the University of Florida's National Older Driver Research Center. In partnership with the American Automobile Association, it recently released a chart that matches drivers' woes with specific cars and their on-board modifications.

Someone with diminished mobility, for example, could benefit from wide-angle mirrors, heated seats with lumbar support, or the likes of Nissan's Around View mirror, which uses four wide-angle cameras to show the driver any obstructions during parking and minimize the need for head-turning when reversing. A senior with vision limitations might seek out larger audio and climate controls with

contrasting text or infrared night-vision cameras, like the ones seen on luxury cars from Mercedes-Benz and BMW.

The U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has issued guidelines and recommendations for designing cities that better accommodate older drivers. The book, which Transport Canada says is widely used in this country, addresses everything from intersection angles and lighting to traffic-signal placement and street-sign readability.

"The changes required to achieve better urban transportation outcomes . . . are inevitably linked to the way our cities are designed and built," says Antonio Paez, a researcher with the McMaster Institute for Transport and Logistics at McMaster University in Hamilton.

A typeface called Clearview, for example, is said to make signs legible to elderly drivers from 16 per cent further away -- and 12 per cent for younger and middle-aged drivers. Other recommendations include protected left-hand turn signals (green arrows), better pavement markings at intersections, roads that intersect at an angle no less than 75 degrees, acceleration lanes for right turns onto high-speed roads, and simpler road signs with sharply contrasting colours.

A study published in a 2006 issue of the journal *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation* found the FHWA's recommended improvements generally result in fewer driver errors and increased confidence among younger drivers (ages 25 to 45) nearly as often as among older ones (65 to 85).

According to CanDRIVE, a national interdisciplinary research organization focused on older drivers, statistics on seniors' road safety can be as flattering as they are damning to the demographic.

Canada's Traffic Injury Research Foundation shows seniors account for the second-largest proportion of road deaths, behind only 15 to 24 year olds; drivers 80 and older are at an even higher risk, with a fatality rate 1.5 times greater than that of teenagers.

However, the high death and injury rate among seniors has more to do with their frailty than anything else. And when you look at absolute collision rates, Canadians aged 55 to 70 have the lowest of any age group in the country.

The latter finding is credited to the fact seniors operate vehicles far less frequently. Based on kilometres driven, the Canada Safety Council reports older drivers in fact have more collisions than any other age group.

"Age, per se, does not cause crashes. In fact, healthy seniors are some of the safest on the road because they don't take risks and have lots of driving experience," said CanDRIVE executive Dr. Malcolm Man-Son-Hing, who specializes in geriatric medicine.

"It's the development of medical and psychological conditions that causes the problem, and of course those are more common among older people."

In April, an 84-year-old woman lost control of her car and levelled an Ottawa bus shelter, killing a woman inside.

In 2004, a 74-year-old man from Montreal plowed his vehicle into a group of people, killing two and injuring seven others. And in 2000, a Toronto mother of three was dragged to death for nearly a kilometre by an 84-year-old driver who was later sentenced to house arrest.

Ottawa retiree Jean Hoganson is frustrated that high-profile incidents like these are a flashpoint for sweeping condemnation of her generation's driving abilities.

"Every time an older person has an accident, there's this hue and cry to get them

off the road," said Hoganson, 66. "Although there is a problem, there's a simple way to handle it."

Her solution is to leave the decision of who should and shouldn't drive to the vehicle operator's doctor and immediate family members. And in most parts of Canada, the burden of reporting drivers who may be unsafe indeed falls on physicians.

The flaw in this system, according to the National Older Driver Research Center, is that "there aren't any clinical tests that are definitively predictive of a person's ability to drive," making it unfair for doctors to bear such a responsibility.

In early May, the Insurance Bureau of Canada recommended the government legislate the driving allowances of older drivers who suffer from potentially hazardous medical conditions. One suggestion was to gradually de-license people as their health changes -- sort of a reverse twist on graduated licensing for younger drivers.

In Japan, there are even incentives for older drivers to park their cars, with businesses offering people who have surrendered their licences everything from higher-interest bank accounts to meal discounts.

Darren M. Scott, a McMaster University professor who has studied the travel habits of older drivers in Canada, predicts baby boomers will be highly resistant to hanging up their car keys.

"People who are soon to retire have had access to cars all of their lives, and are unlikely to give them up -- at least anytime soon," said Scott. "Also, these people often live in suburbs, which are difficult to serve with public transportation. In other words, a residential choice that was made a long time ago has implications for future mobility."

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