

Driving evaluations and client recommendations

Driving is a skill of daily living that most people value. When injury, disease, illness or aging potentially affect one's ability to drive, a comprehensive driving evaluation should be taken. These are different than screening tests to renew a licence. Driving licence assessments are more of a screening tool and not the same as what is described here. For clients to renew their license, some provinces require that people at age 75, 80, and so on, have a medical examination to confirm they are physically able to drive safely.

There are two parts to a comprehensive driving evaluation. One is done in a driving clinic and the second is done on the road.

Part one: Clinical evaluation

The occupational therapist begins the evaluation by determining the effects that your client's medical condition, medications and functional limitations may have on the driving task.

- Visual screening is completed. This is a check to see that your client's eyes meet the minimum standards for driving in your province. As well, how they move their eyes, their ability to judge distance and how well they see out to the side when you keep their eyes straight ahead.
- The occupational therapist will also look at the client's arms and legs to see that they have enough movement and strength to control all of the features of the car. If they have some difficulties, adaptive equipment should be recommended.
- Perceptual and cognitive abilities are evaluated by measuring reaction time, seeing how your client can pay attention to more than one thing at a time and completing some thinking skill tests to check their memory, problem solving abilities and how well their brain can interpret what they see.
- The occupational therapist also takes a driving history, notes the type of vehicle driven, and discusses potential adaptive driving equipment.

Part two: On-road evaluation

All aspects of the driving task are assessed:

- Physical ability and endurance.
- Cognitive/behavioural skills. For example, ability to be aware of potential hazards.
- Visual/perceptual skills. For example, how effectively your client uses their eyes, looks around when you are driving and is able to take in the information correctly, make sense of it and act appropriately.
- All responses to the traffic environments. For example, your client's ability to handle unusual situations, how they handle pedestrians, ability to cope with busy traffic areas or even the expressway.

Based on all the information gathered during both parts of the evaluation, the occupational therapist, usually in collaboration with a driver instructor, interprets results and makes recommendations based on performance strengths and limitations as well as on driving potential.

Factors affecting driving recommendations

What if physical problems exist?

Different vehicles offer different space behind the wheel, and very simple positioning or a cushion may provide an easy solution to a presenting problem. However, some clients may need to drive with adaptive driving equipment, and training would thus be recommended prior to installation of driving aids in their own car. In some instances, such as people who use a wheelchair or scooter, a modified van will be necessary. Occupational therapists are aware of state-of-the-art and safety-tested equipment. They know the width of lifts to accommodate specific wheelchair sizes, the benefits and limitations of full size vans versus minivans, lifts versus ramps, about power seat-bases, different types of hand controls, wheelchair securement, etc.



What if a person is fearful of driving?

There are some clients who have phobias and anxiety about driving. Occupational therapists have training in emotional and mental health issues, however most who specialize in this field also have extra training for working with persons with driving anxiety. Occupational therapists assist clients using a systematic desensitization and graded treatment plan to return the person to driving comfortably and safely. Sometimes, the occupational therapist works collaboratively with a psychologist.

What if cognition is affected?

Often after brain injury or stroke, reflexes and mental functions (attention, concentration, decision-making, speed of information processing, etc.) are affected. This may result in the person being unsafe to drive either temporarily, or in some cases, permanently. Potential to benefit from driver training would be determined at the time of assessment, or re-assessment may be recommended at a later date.

What if the person is a senior driver?

Age alone does not stop a person from driving. When family members, family doctors or even the person himself/herself are unsure of driving ability, they are often referred for an evaluation. The occupational therapist is knowledgeable about age-related changes that may affect driving ability. Through a comprehensive assessment, fitness to drive is determined. Adaptive equipment, altered driving techniques and self-restriction are often very helpful to keep seniors driving longer and safely.

Refresher education

Many formal and informal driver refresher courses are available. This section provides information about these courses but does not endorse any of them. At this time, there is not much evidence that supports the ability of these courses to improve safe driving abilities. However, there is some evidence that indicates that refresher courses that include an on road (driving) component are more useful than those that do not.

Taking a refresher course, such as sessions offered by the Canadian Automobile Association or the 55Alive program, will provide information about signs that driving is no longer safe, conditions and behaviours that may affect the ability to drive safely and strategies to enhance safe driving abilities. Some organizations provide an on-road evaluation that helps drivers pinpoint aspects of driving that are problematic.

While we don't know how much effect these courses will have on driving in the long term, gaining this information may help older drivers and their families identify signs that driving is no longer safe and strategies that can be used to enhance safe driving skills.

Driving retirement

There may come a time when your client no longer feels safe to drive or may be told that they can no longer drive. All drivers must consider that their ability to drive may not continue throughout their lifespan. Before the effects of aging influence the ability to drive safely, older adults should start the transition to driving retirement and consider the mobility options that will suit their needs within their community.

Alternate transportation plan

A growing number of communities are exploring transportation alternatives such as; public transit, community shuttles, taxis, car hire services, specialized transit for seniors, volunteer drivers and community rideshare groups.

It is recommended that older drivers become familiar and comfortable with alternative transportation in their region. If alternative transportation methods are not available, older drivers and their families should consider contacting their regional government or seniors' organizations.

Together they might be able to establish new services in their community. While the ability to drive may no longer be an option, all members of a community have the right to some form of transportation and should lobby for access to cost-effective and accessible transportation services.

About driving evaluations

Driving evaluations differ across the country and steps are being taken to standardize the testing. For example, the Canadian Driving Research Initiative for Vehicular Safety in the Elderly (CanDRIVE), led by Dr. Malcolm Hing and Dr. Shawn Marshall, is an interdisciplinary health related research program dedicated to improving the safety of older drivers.

In the meantime, if you are referred to a driver evaluation program the evaluation should be as detailed as possible to ensure that all the information is available to make recommendations regarding retraining, equipment purchases and adaptations. In Ontario, the Ministry of Transportation requires that all evaluations be completed by a registered occupational therapist and all driving programs must be approved by the ministry. For those outside of Ontario, please check with your provincial Motor Vehicle Licensing Board.

You may also look at the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED) for more detailed information. [The ADED web site](#) details codes of ethics, contents of evaluations and much more. There are also several occupational therapists who also hold the ADED qualifications who can be found on this web site.

